WWII

124 PAGES ★ EYEWITNESSES ★ AUTHENTIC DOCUMENTS

Bringing History to Life

80 YEARS AGO

BATTLE OF STALINGRAD





6TH ARMY SURROUNDED

The Red Army trapped German remnants in city

PULVERISED BY THE LUFTWAFFE

Blitzkrieg descended into drawn-out war among the city's ruins

STALIN'S CITY ON THE RADAR

Hitler eyed a propaganda victory and defied his generals in blunder

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– HITLER AND STALIN'S MERCILESS SHOWDOWN –



Animals flee this hell; the hardest stones cannot bear it for long; only men endure.

Red Army officer to Soviet war reporter Vasily Grossman.

WELCOME

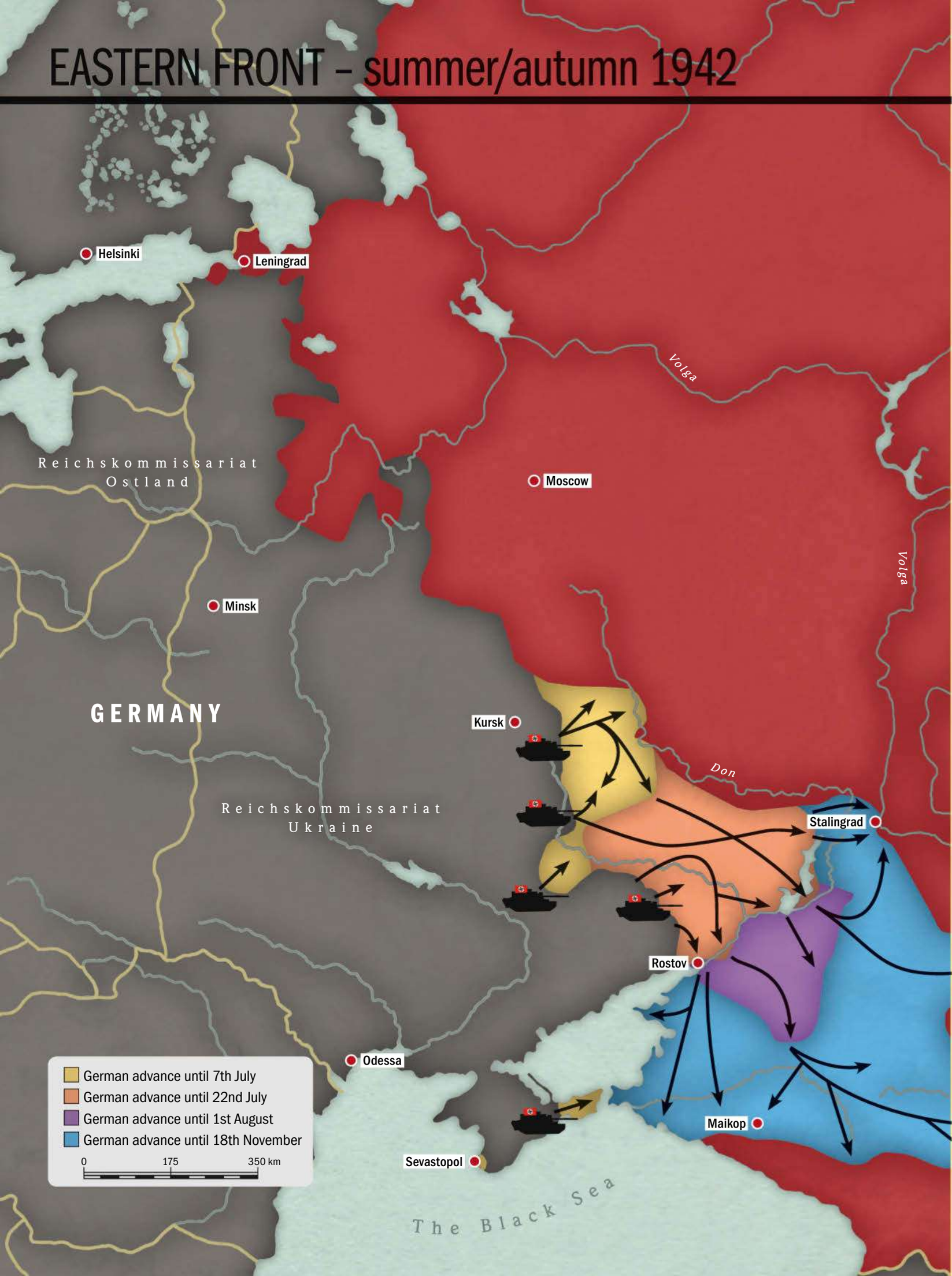
The bitter fighting in the ruins of Stalingrad, the horrors on the dark waters of the Volga River and the intense air war over Stalingrad cost hundreds of thousands of soldiers and civilians their lives. The battle was so exhausting and cruel that even World War II's hardiest generals couldn't help but be affected by the massive casualties, for which two men bore the ultimate responsibility: Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin. Without blinking, they sent man after man to their deaths, and the Battle of Stalingrad became the supreme test of strength between history's two cruellest dictators, both of whom refused to give in.

Hitler and Stalin both invested and lost so many soldiers and weapons at Stalingrad that in time it became clear that whoever won the battle would win the war. In that exhausting test of strength, German and Soviet men fought for their lives with spades and bayonets in hand-to-hand battles for every room in every house in the city. The battle is eerily depicted in great detail in letters and front-line reports, as well as through heart-breaking eyewitness descriptions. All accounts bring to life the desperate situation in the city, with all that the fighting entailed: starvation, disease, rape and death.

The Battle of Stalingrad covers the entire story from the Soviets' initial desperate defence against the confident German war machine to the moment when the Wehrmacht's soldiers realised that they were going to die from cold, starvation or Soviet bullets in an insignificant city on the River Volga, more than 2,500 kilometres from home. At the same time, the Soviets recognised that their enormous sacrifice had been of the utmost importance. The battle would turn the tide of war once and for all.

Enjoy the issue.

The advance on Stalingrad *was made more difficult in unfamiliar terrain that nullified German blitzkrieg tactics.*


EASTERN FRONT – summer/autumn 1942
Helsinki
Leningrad
Volga
Reichskommissariat Ostland
Moscow
Volga
Minsk
GERMANY
Kursk
Don
Reichskommissariat Ukraine
Stalingrad
Rostov
Odessa
Maikop
Sevastopol
The Black Sea
German advance until 7th July
German advance until 22nd July
German advance until 1st August
German advance until 18th November
0
175
350 km

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In the sweltering summer heat, German tanks roar across the Soviet steppes, meeting minimal resistance. Flushed with success, Hitler hungrily shifts his focus from the oil fields of the Caucasus to the industrial city of Stalingrad.

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Not one step back!
Stalin wants to put a stop to the Red Army's withdrawal, so introduces a brutal doctrine that punishes cowardice with death. His generals must buy time to build a new army, and the price will be paid with Soviet blood.

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How Stalingrad survived
Workers are sent into battle armed with spades.

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Death lurked in the clouds
An inferno of fire rains down on Stalingrad in August, reducing the city to a heap of rubble that burns for months. The Luftwaffe rules the skies, but the Soviets turn the Germans' own strategy against them.

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Rat war in the ruins
No buildings remain standing in Stalingrad as German infantry take the city's suburbs. But the ruins will prove disastrous for the Germans as they're forced into brutal hand-to-hand combat for every inch.

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Citizens caught in the crossfire
In the middle of the fighting stands Stalingrad's civilian population, tormented and harassed from both sides. Only a few survive on a diet of dirty river water and mud – but not before losing everything.

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The Soviet trap closes
While their countrymen sacrifice their lives to hold Stalingrad, Soviet generals deploy a million troops to surround the city in a daring operation. Now the fortunes of the battlefield can start to turn.

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War's last eyewitnesses
Herbert Scherer witnessed with his own eyes the inhuman treatment of Stalingrad's German prisoners in prison camps in Siberia. He himself survived against all odds.

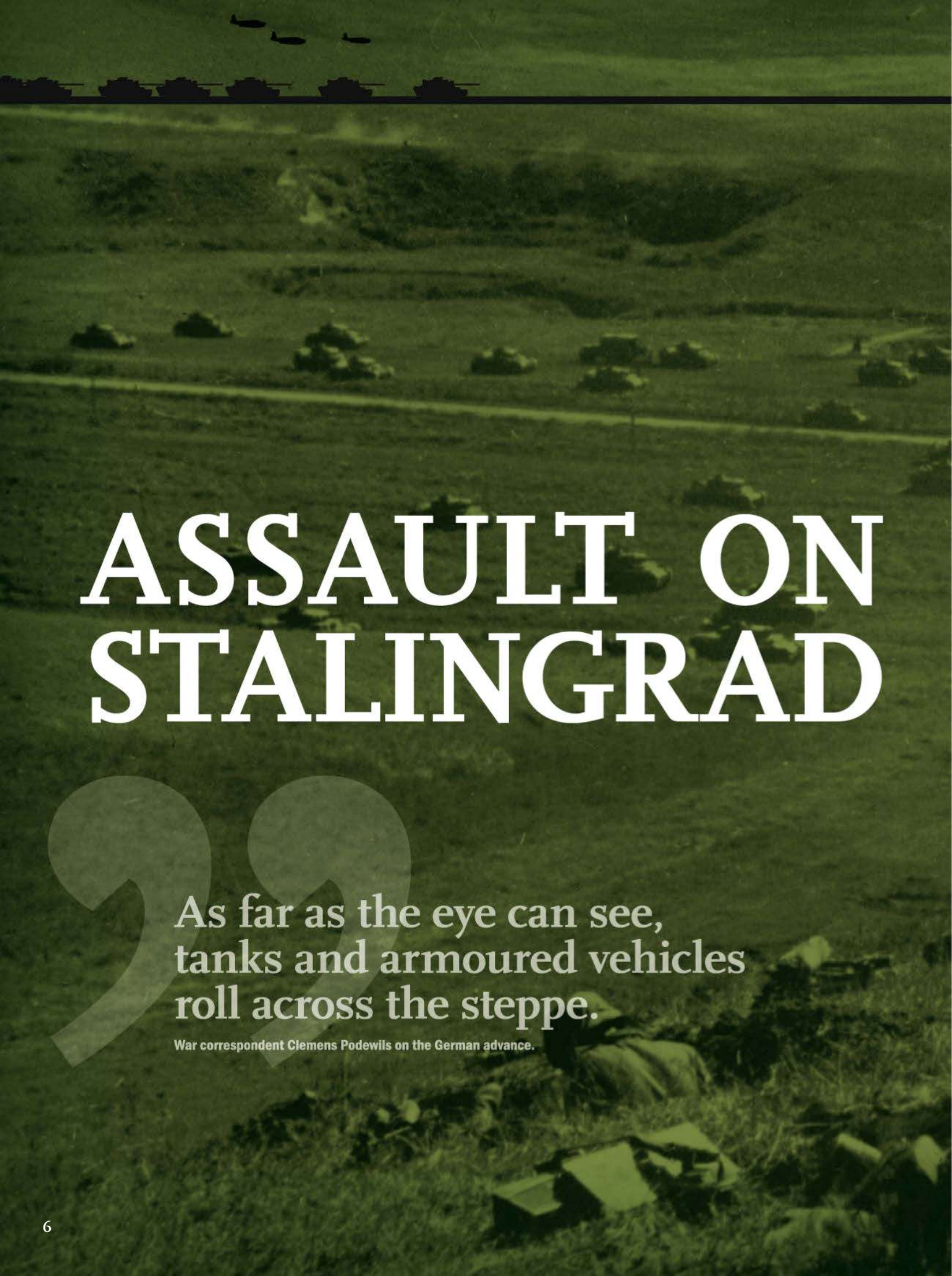
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Doomsday awaited in Stalingrad
In December 1942, the German 6th Army is surrounded, and as the harsh Russian winter closes in, defeat becomes final. At least 100,000 Germans end up in Soviet captivity.

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Dirty and unshaven, *German soldiers fought on. But as the battle heated up, a lack of basic hygiene could prove lethal.*



ASSAULT ON STALINGRAD

As far as the eye can see, tanks and armoured vehicles roll across the steppe.

War correspondent Clemens Podewils on the German advance.

Eastern Front, spring/summer 1942



Fall Blau (Case Blue) *was originally designed to secure control of Soviet oil wells, but Hitler soon changed his mind and set Stalingrad as his main target instead.*

Assault on Stalingrad

In 1942, Nazi Germany stood ready for another major offensive in the Soviet Union. 1.2 million German troops surged forward, and with the panzer divisions once again in the lead, the German army swept across the steppes. The course was set for the Soviets' vital oil fields, but Hitler was soon dazzled by a new target…

By Troels Ussing

Adolf Hitler looked ahead with renewed optimism in the spring of 1942. He'd recovered from the winter's ugly disappointment on the Eastern Front, where the Wehrmacht's troops faced an insurmountable Soviet wall during Operation Barbarossa. The huge offensive that began so promisingly in the summer of 1941, advancing 650 kilometres in just two weeks, had ended with ignominious defeat outside Moscow's city limits and retreat to the west.

Now another summer lay ahead – and in a fresh large-scale assault, Hitler and his generals dreamed of breaking the back of the Soviet defences to pave the way for a major German victory on the Eastern Front. With this latest advance, the Nazis aimed first and foremost to seize control of the rich oil fields of the Caucasus in the south of the Soviet Union. If all went to plan, the Führer would receive a much-needed boost to his insatiable war machine, while arch-enemy Joseph Stalin, without access to his oil reserves, would be crippled and forced into a humiliating surrender.

Hitler still firmly believed the German armed forces could easily crush the Soviet Union, even though the giant to the east had not exactly proved to be the *"rotten edifice"* that with a *"kick in the door"* would *"come crashing down"*, as Hitler had assured his general staff before Barbarossa. Now, however, the Führer was convinced that Stalin and his Bolshevik gang would snap like twigs once the Nazis gave the Soviet door another firm strike with their polished leather boots.

"The enemy has suffered severe losses in men and material. In an effort to exploit what appeared to him to be early successes, he has expended during the winter the bulk of reserves intended ▸



Hitler directed the attack *from his Ukrainian base with his armaments minister Albert Speer and Luftwaffe commander Erhard Milch.*

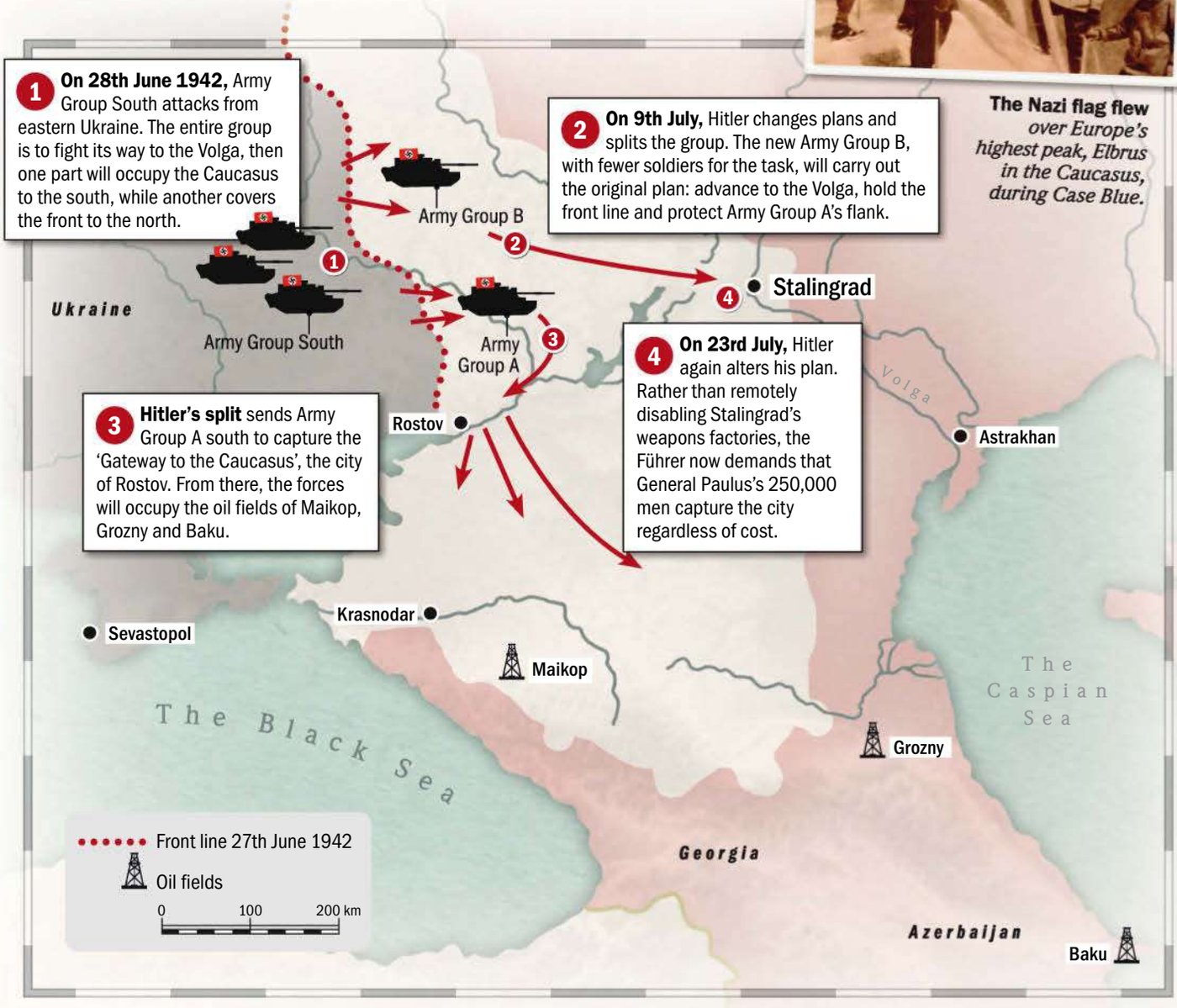
Germans went for Stalin's black gold in Case Blue



Hitler's obsession with oil convinced him that the rich underground deposits beneath the Caucasus mountains could decide the war. This drove Case Blue, the operation to capture the region, secure oil supplies and bring the Soviets to their knees. Prior to the German summer offensive of 1942, almost 70 percent of all Soviet oil came from wells in Baku, Azerbaijan, while the oil fields of Maikop and Grozny provided an additional 25 percent. For the Führer, the maths was simple: with the black gold in Soviet hands, Stalin could maintain his defences, but with the oil in German hands, Hitler's war machine would roar unstoppably across the Soviet Union. As the offensive began, Army Group South would attack through Ukraine and continue across the Don Steppe to the Volga, the Soviets' main artery. The river enabled Stalin to transport oil from the south to more northerly parts of the Soviet Union. After German forces took control of the Volga, the army would begin phase two of the operation, heading for the Caucasian oil. This was the original plan, but Hitler repeatedly amended Case Blue's objectives.



The Nazi flag flew *over Europe's highest peak, Elbrus in the Caucasus, during Case Blue.*



for later operations. As soon as the weather and the state of the terrain allows, we must seize the initiative again, and through the superiority of German leadership and the German soldier force our will upon the enemy. Our aim is to wipe out the entire defence potential remaining to the Soviets," was Hitler's confident declaration in April 1942.

The frost once again receded as the snow melted and spring's swampy terrain was baked into a solidified mass of earth under the strength of the sun's rays. By late spring, the Soviet Union's topsoil was as solid as concrete, and German vehicles could rush forward with much-needed supplies for the depleted troops on the Eastern Front.

"Morale was higher," said tank commander Bernd Freytag von Loringhoven. *"We were in a good state."*

Following their Führer's example, many German soldiers buried the torment of the winter months, exchanging depression for a fanatical fighting spirit.

Stalin's black gold was the target

By June 1942, Hitler and his generals were fine-tuning their plan for the summer offensive. The front line in the Soviet Union stretched 2,700 kilometres from the Gulf of Finland in the north to the Sea of Asov in the south. Unlike during Barbarossa, in 1942 the Germans would focus almost exclusively on the southern front in the impending attack, code-named *Fall Blau* – Case Blue.

"All available forces will be concentrated on the main operations in the southern sector, with the aim of destroying the enemy before the Don River, in order to secure the Caucasian oil fields and the passes through the Caucasus mountains themselves," stated Hitler's Führer Directive 41, in which the dictator also emphasised that *"all available forces of the Army and Luftwaffe are ready to go into action in overwhelming strength, in order to achieve rapid and decisive success".*

Army Group South, tasked with the attack, possessed around 1.2 million German soldiers. In addition, 300,000 Italian, Hungarian and Romanian forces had been placed at the disposal of the army group's commander-in-chief, Field Marshal Fedor von Bock. The front-line troops planned to assemble along a curved line in eastern Ukraine and from there launch an advance to the Don River. The force would then proceed on towards the 3,500-kilometre Volga River, the Soviets' primary transport route. Taking control of the area between the current front line in eastern Ukraine and the Volga bank 700 kilometres further on would complete Case Blue's first phase.

The second phase comprised the summer offensive's main target: the oil fields in the Caucasus. During 1942, Hitler had become so besotted with the Caucasian black gold in the southern Soviet Union that he personally read manuals on how the raw material was extracted and refined. When he met with senior generals at Army Group South headquarters near Poltava in central Ukraine on 1st June, the Führer focused on the oil fields located near the Caucasus's major cities.

"If we do not take Maikop and Grozny, then I must put an end to the war," Hitler stated bluntly.

Caucasian oil was also important to Stalin and the Soviet Union, as the three main oil fields at Maikop, Grozny and Baku helped to keep the entire Soviet production machine running at full steam. If Hitler seized this vital raw material, he would kill two birds with one stone. He would simultaneously weaken the enemy and give Germany a much-needed shot of black medicine to ease the worrying decline in production in the hinterland. With the vast distances across the Soviet front, Caucasian oil could also help consolidate the panzer divisions' advance.

Stalingrad lay on the Volga, but was not on Hitler's radar at this time. The Führer's order was simply to *"bring the city under fire from heavy artillery so that it may no longer be of any use as an industrial or communications centre".*

During the Poltava conference, Hitler remained so focused on oil that, according to Panzer General Ewald von Kleist, the Führer barely mentioned Stalingrad.

"The capture of Stalingrad was subsidiary to the main aim. It was only of importance as a convenient place, a bottleneck between the Don and the Volga, where we could block an attack on our flank by Russian forces coming from the East. At the start Stalingrad was no more than a name on the map to us," the general claimed after the war.

It would not be long before the Führer's attention would be captured by the industrial city that bore Stalin's name, but when the German attack on the southern front started on 28th June, Stalingrad was little



FEDOR VON BOCK (1880-1945)
Leading the blitzkrieg against the Soviets in 1942 was Field Marshal Fedor von Bock, who'd previously led attacks on Poland and Moscow. Von Bock's victories had given him a status that (almost) let him speak out freely against Hitler. Von Bock was a monarchist and therefore not committed to

8/2 Stalin attacks the German-occupied town of Rzhev. Endless fighting ensues in the town dubbed the "meat grinder".

8/2 German troops are surrounded in the snow near Demyansk. But despite repeated attempts, the Soviets can't wipe them out.

12/5 At Kharkiv, the Red Army fails to beat back the Germans. Shortly after, the German summer offensive begins.



Villages were razed to the ground *by the German advance. Here, a tank attack sets fire to buildings near the city of Voronezh in Russia.*

more than another Soviet city. A city to which no soldier gave a second thought. The Germans were focused on one thing only: to strike the enemy at maximum speed.

Tanks thundered through Ukraine

The roar of the tanks' V12 engines was the first thing to shatter the silence along the front in eastern Ukraine on the morning of 28th June 1942. Soon, the machines of three panzer divisions roared forward across a line some 150 kilometres wide, while soldiers from 20 other divisions followed the caterpillar tracks at a slower pace.

Soviet resistance varied in strength, but almost everywhere the Red Army was forced back. General Friedrich Paulus's 6th Army, the largest and strongest German army with over 250,000 men, initially met stiff resistance when its troops broke out of an oak grove to launch their offensive on 30th June. The Red Army's T-34s and anti-tank guns lay buried in the area, camouflaged with military green nets, making them hard to spot. Several German armoured vehicles were effectively stopped, but in the end, the Soviets were powerless, noted war correspondent Clemens Podewils, who followed on the heels of the 6th Army:

"In a few places our attack gets stuck and there are duels. But then the enemy start to move too. They retreat and there are longer intervals between their shells exploding around us. The Russian tanks come out of their emplacements like tortoises and try to escape by zigzagging. Some of them still wear their camouflage netting like green wigs."

Soon, German tanks rolled more freely across Eastern Ukraine's endless fields of grain and sunflowers. Tank commanders occasionally raised their heads above their tank turrets to wave triumphantly at their comrades as the landscape changed from farmland to barren steppe on the way to the Don River.

"As far as the eye can see, armoured vehicles and half-tracks are rolling forward over the steppe. Pennants float in the shimmering afternoon air," wrote Podewils.

Progress was made even easier thanks to chaotic lines of communication among Soviet forces. The ▸

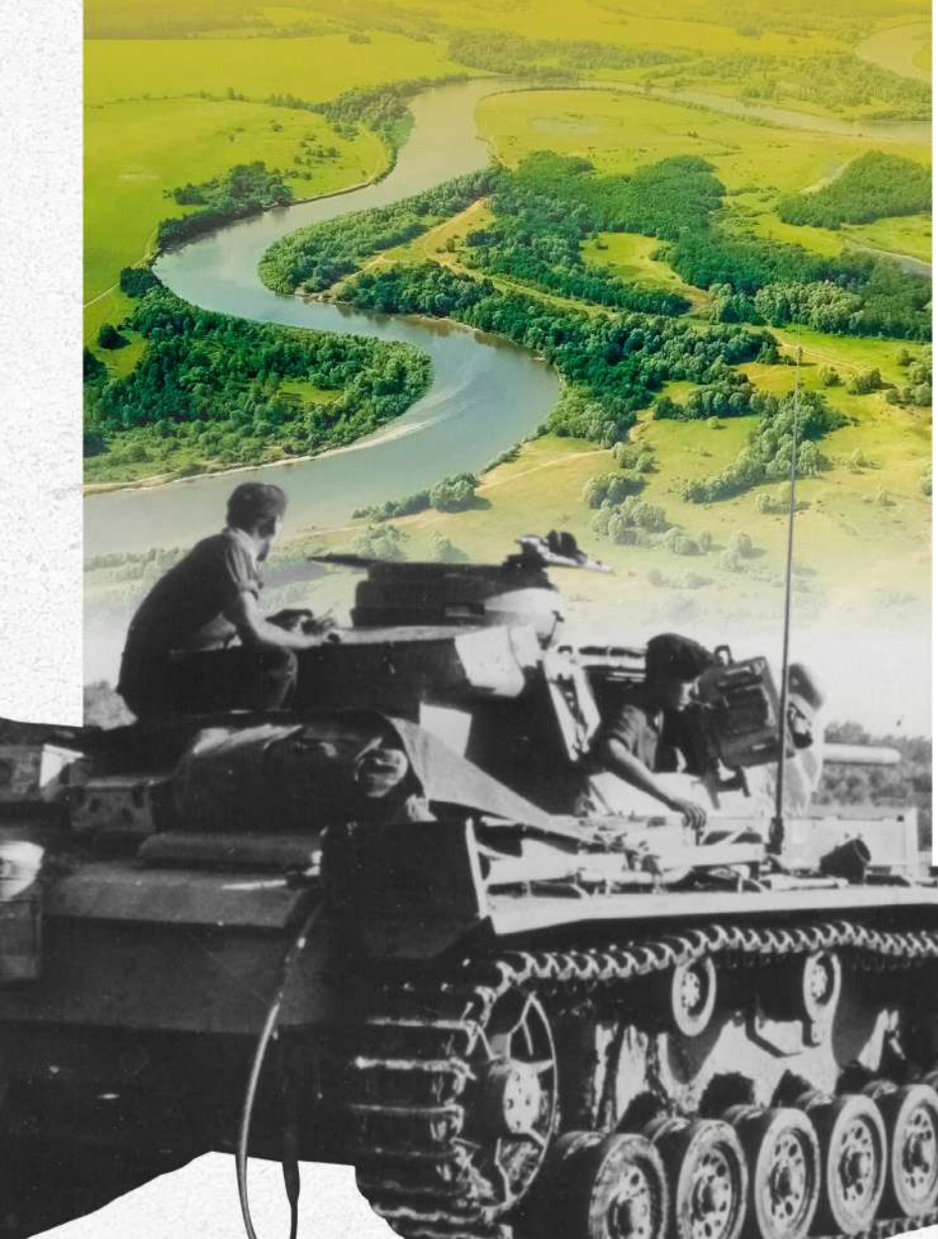
River was the Soviets' main transport route

The Volga was dubbed the heart of the Soviet Union because it meandered through its central regions. During the war, the river's course made it a vital transport artery for the Soviets.

The Volga River meanders for 3,531 km from its source north-west of Moscow to its mouth in the Caspian Sea. With its branching tributaries, the river pulsed with life during the war across almost all of central Russia.

Barges transported food – in particular grain and fish – to both the civilian population and the army, but the river was especially crucial in relation to war production. Major industrial cities such as Stalingrad lay along the Volga's banks, and weapons and other munitions were brought as close to the front as boats could get.

It was also the transport artery used by the Soviets to bring oil from the rich fields of Baku in Azerbaijan to the rest of the Soviet Union. That's why it was vital for Stalin to maintain control of the southernmost part of the Volga, where Stalingrad was situated.



German tanks reached the Volga *in August. By then, the Luftwaffe had already blockaded the river.*

Red Army's staff officers were forced to fly around in biplanes to get an overview of the troops on the ground. But every time they took to the air, the German advance party's Messerschmitt fighters appeared in the sky in search of easy prey.

Within a week, Paulus's 6th Army, along with his panzer army, conducted a pincer movement west of the Don River. The Germans surrounded and captured 30,000 Soviets. Paulus enjoyed the success, despite the fact that his son, Ernst Alexander, was wounded in his tank during the operation. When Paulus later wrote to his son in hospital, he brought encouraging news. The successful manoeuvre seemed to have rattled the commander of the Red Army's South-Western Front, Semyon Timoshenko.

Paulus wrote: *"A Russian officer who fell into our hands told us that Timoshenko himself became involved in one of the tank engagements and that when he saw with his own eyes how his forward troops, and particularly his tanks, were being literally shot to pieces, he exclaimed 'This is frightful!' and then, without another word, turned and left the battlefield."*

The Germans enjoyed a veritable rush of victories at the beginning of the summer offensive. Every time the troops passed burnt-out T-34 tanks, the sight triggered a noticeable boost in confidence. Among the German tank crews, a contest ensued to see who could add the most lines to the statistics booklet when the casualties were tallied, according to 22nd Panzer Division tank driver Henry Metelmann: *"Whenever a Russian tank was hit, almost every panzer in the battle claimed it as a kill,"* he said.

Despite being high on success and speeding across the steppes at up to 10 km/h, the German forces soon found the landscape increasingly inhospitable. On the steppes, everyone suffered, German and Soviet.

Plagued by heat, dust and thirst

As the German motorised vehicles roared eastwards, infantrymen and artillerymen ran after them, drenched in sweat that poured from every pore in the summer heat. Although the Germans had been supplied with more motorised and armoured vehicles than during Operation Barbarossa, most divisions still trudged forward with only horses to pull the artillery equipment. And the summer sun over the Soviet Union quickly made the going unbearable.

It was *"as hot as Africa, with huge dust clouds"*, said General Karl Strecker, commander of XI Corps, while his chief of staff, Helmuth Groscurth, noted in mid-July that the temperature was a staggering *"53 degrees [Celsius] in the sun"*.

Even when the Germans halted their march to make camp, the heat

The constant underestimation of enemy potential is gradually taking on a grotesque form and becoming dangerous. ■ **Chief of the German Army High Command Franz Halder.**

remained intolerable: *"The tarpaulin does provide some shade, but all the same it's terribly hot under it, as it has to be pitched so low to prevent the enemy seeing it,"* read a letter home from Corporal Hans S, whose regiment of the 389th Infantry Division was taking part in the advance.

Severe heat plagued both German and Soviet troops. Red Army soldiers weren't necessarily trained to fight in a climate where heatwaves, thirst and dust continually drained the troops' spirits.

"The heat is merciless and terrible. Our soldiers' lips are parched. As heat from a furnace, the hot wind of the steppes blows through our trenches. It is no cooler at night. In dug-outs the candles melt, turning into a liquid mess... Water! The steppe is waterless; the rare steppe rivers have dried up. Old people round here hardly remember such heat. Our soldiers' flasks hold two days' ration of water," wrote one Soviet soldier in a front-line report obtained by British correspondent Alexander Werth. But the heat was not the only threat, as the soldier revealed:

"The steppe is burning, set on fire by bombs from the air and by planes that have crashed, by shells and mines... The smoke of fires, the dust raised by the tanks ploughing up the steppe, are rising to the sky like enormous clouds."

Soviet war correspondent Vasily Grossman also noticed the dust every time his countrymen were forced to retreat. *"The dry, grey dust"* covered everything: clothes, rifles, sacks, guns and even the otherwise *"black shiny covers of staff typewriters"*.

"That was a terrible dust, the dust of retreat. It ate up the men's faith, it extinguished the warmth of people's hearts," Grossman wrote.

Although the dust clouds were also a constant nuisance for the advancing Germans, the main challenge for the army was the lack of water and food. As the 389th Infantry Division made good progress across the steppes on the west side of the Don, the soldiers realised that the Soviet Union's vast distances and extreme weather continued to challenge, just as they had the year before during Operation Barbarossa.

"Not a village, not a bush, not a tree anywhere, and the worst thing, no water. On the other hand, not a cloud in the sky, and the hot rays of the sun are beating down mercilessly on our foxholes. As a result of our rapid advance and the thinly▸



Unbearable heat *pursued the German troops across the steppe. Here, soldiers found shade in an anti-tank trench near the town of Rostov.*

populated area (we're in the Don bend) rations are very limited. We Landsers ended up getting half a slice of bread a day. The last two days we haven't had any at all, just three-quarters of a billycan of soup from the kitchen once a day. But worst of all is coping with thirst in the August heat. We watch for the field kitchen a hundred times a day and wait from hour to hour to see whether there's any coffee coming to wet our tongues," wrote Hans S.

But the corporal would have to look long and hard for relief, because the Red Army had no intention of letting the Germans wring so much as a drop of water or a crumb of bread from the steppe.

Civilians suffered during advance

One of the reasons why the German troops were thirsty and hungry was that the Red Army, during every retreat, took great care to poison the wells, just as *"the Russians have poured petrol over the grain supplies"* before setting them alight, as Hans S noted.

German hunger was bad news for the few civilians left in the already depopulated region. Long before the Germans arrived, most Soviet citizens had packed their horse-drawn carts or loaded their camels with their most important belongings before setting off to Stalingrad in the east. Those who remained were mainly elderly people who had neither the strength nor the desire to leave. Their meagre supplies were plundered by German troops – and often very quickly because the soldiers were in a hurry.

"Black figures jump down from tanks and half-tracks. Suddenly a great execution is carried out. The poultry, with bloody ruffs and beating their wings in a paroxysm, was carried back to the vehicles. The men jumped back on board, the tank tracks ground the soil, and the vehicles moved on again," Podewils reported.

However, the local populace often starved just as badly themselves, because the Red Army had burned any crops still in the ground so the enemy couldn't get their hands on them. As a result, the German troops met faces more tortured and pinched than their own. The encounters with the impoverished local population made an impression on the otherwise hard-boiled soldiers.

"A really small boy stood in our way. He no longer begged, he just muttered: 'Paw, bread.' It was eerie how much sorrow, suffering and apathy could exist in a child's face," wrote a 20-year-old German soldier in a letter home to his family.

Food, however, was not the only scarcity for German troops at the front. As the weeks went by and kilometre after kilometre was covered, the German tanks at the front had to stop more and more often as they ran low on fuel. They were forced to wait for fuel supplies that sometimes took a long time to arrive. While stationary, the tanks were vulnerable, and the enforced halt created a weakness in the offensive. It was one, however, that had already been factored in by the German generals, learning from experience after Operation Barbarossa.

Despite these momentary pauses, the German war machine continued to rumble on at high speed. But talk of fuel frustrated the oil-obsessed Hitler. Suddenly, the Führer drastically altered the plans for Case Blue and, with a snap of his fingers, made a decision that would have fatal consequences for the Germans' wartime fortunes.

Hitler ordered Stalingrad taken

On 16th July 1942, Hitler landed on an airstrip north of Vinnytsia. Here in central Ukraine, the Führer had built *Führerhauptquartier Werwolf* – his advanced headquarters – in a wooded area where he could reside relatively close to the fighting on the Eastern Front. The Werwolf complex provided the Nazi with the protection he needed, just like at Wolf's Lair in Rastenburg, Poland.

Upon arriving at Werwolf, the Führer strolled around inspecting the facility. Pine trees camouflaged the large log cabins, while Hitler's own Führerhaus was enclosed in a neat courtyard, with a solid concrete bunker nearby providing the necessary security. Outside the bunker were bottles of pure oxygen, pumped into the building because the Führer feared the noxious fumes given off by the ferroconcrete.

Security was tight everywhere; even Werwolf's vegetable garden was under constant guard by soldiers, to remove the risk of someone poisoning the produce that ended up on Hitler's plate. As a further safeguard against assassination, the vegetables were also chemically analysed and checked by a taster before the Führer sank his teeth into them.

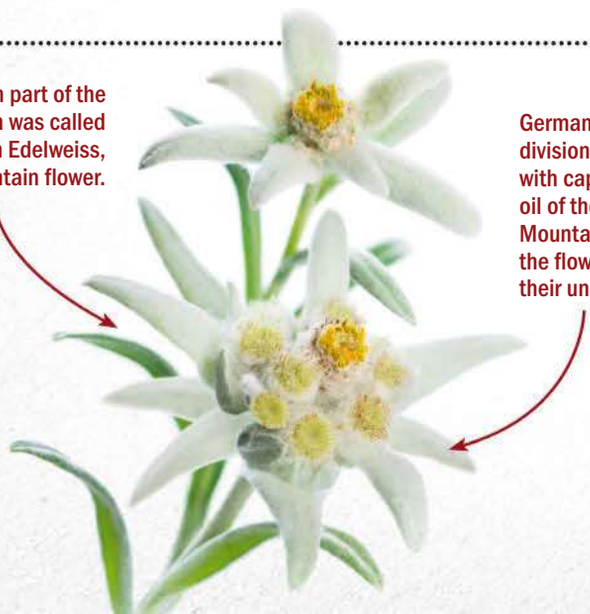
Hitler would spend the next month and a half in Werwolf, meeting with the Eastern Front generals and giving them orders. The army had advanced so rapidly in the summer offensive that by 9th July, a week before arriving at Werwolf and against all advice, Hitler had changed the plans for Case Blue. Army Group South under Field Marshal Fedor von Bock would no longer ▸

FACTS

Nazi Germany had no natural oil resources.

75%

of its oil was imported from Romania, while most of the remaining supply came from the production of synthetic oil.



The southern part of the push was called Operation Edelweiss, after the mountain flower.

German mountain divisions, tasked with capturing the oil of the Caucasus Mountains, wore the flower on their uniforms.



Street fighting in Rostov *led to a stinging Soviet defeat in five days. From the city, the Germans were free to advance towards the Caucasus.*



The local population fled east *during the German advance. Those few who remained risked starvation as well as their own lives.*

FACTS

During Case Blue, Army Group South was to capture the oil fields, Army Group Central to **hold its front line**, and Army Group North to **capture Leningrad and form an unbroken front line** all the way to Finland.

have the luxury of securing the entire front to the Volga before the troops embarked on phase two, the advance to the Caucasus. Instead, Hitler used the advance's success as a pretext to split the troops. Army Group B would now have to capture the Volga on its own and thereby cut off the land area between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. Army Group A would capture the city of Rostov – dubbed the gateway to the Caucasus – before heading on to the oil fields in the south.

The sharp-nosed von Bock had had enough of Hitler's cavalier decisions and made no attempt to hide his dissent. The angry Führer countered by dismissing him. In Bock's place, Hitler appointed aristocrat Field Marshal Maximilian von Weichs in charge of Army Group B, while the thin-haired Field Marshal Wilhelm List was handed command of Army Group A.

But Hitler wasn't done making fateful decisions. As he roamed feverishly in the near 45-degree heat of Werwolf, he developed a new obsession. The Führer remained convinced that the German Army had such a *"qualitative superiority over the Soviets"* that the summer offensive could be assigned another target without weakening it:

"The task of Army Group B is, as previously laid down, to develop the Don River defences and … thrust forward to Stalingrad," Hitler noted on 23rd July in his Führer Directive 45. But now the troops were no longer simply to advance to the Volga and destroy the armaments factories with artillery, they were to *"smash the enemy forces concentrated there [and] occupy the town"* on the Führer's orders.

Hitler's generals thought the decision insane. Control of the Volga could be maintained without holding Stalingrad, while capturing the stubbornly defended industrial centre would require enormous and unnecessary resources, plus any subsequent occupation of the city would tie up many troops.

"The constant underestimation of enemy potential is gradually taking on a grotesque form and becoming dangerous," wrote the Chief of the General Staff of the German Army High Command, Franz Halder, in his diary.

The generals' protests were futile – Hitler had made his decision. He was determined to secure the enormous propaganda victory that lay in occupying the city that bore Stalin's name. The Führer was desperate to humiliate his arch-rival, and the capture of Stalingrad was left in the hands of the more compliant General Friedrich Paulus and his 6th Army.

Despite his lack of field experience, Paulus was given his first army command in January 1942. He was known for the nervous tics on the left side of his face, ▸

Germans exuded optimism in their letters

The soldiers of the German army were full of confidence as they marched towards Stalingrad. In a letter to his parents, Theodor Körner from Hamburg didn't doubt for a second that the battle had already been won.

18th July 1942

Letter number 7

Dear parents and dear Heinzi!

I would like to take some time to send you a few lines again. We are currently advancing with the tanks in a southerly direction. I think our goal, for the time being, is Stalingrad. At least that's what I heard from the tank soldiers. In this section, the Russians are running so fast that we can't even follow with our bikes. And our daily marches are certainly not short (50-120 km). I wonder when we will be in Iraq?

Yesterday we (the crew in the field kitchen) held a wonderful banquet. I alone ate 11 scrambled eggs and seven Zuckereier *[an egg-based drink similar to eggnog]*. In addition, one whole roasted chicken (!!) with new potatoes (fried in good butter). This was accompanied by plundered Russian sweet wine. So, you can certainly imagine the emotional state I was in! There was only one thing I missed... our nice room in the fire station. But it won't take too much longer, although we don't expect to be released in September. Maybe in October.

So far, I've driven 1,326 km through Russia in my car. The water pump had to be replaced once. That was the only repair so far. Hardly anything, considering that the cars are brand new and have to be broken in on Russian roads. Of the 20 cars we had in the group, seven have broken down completely so far. Two cars were attacked by 13 Russian tanks. The drivers were able to escape in time.

I just heard that Stalingrad has fallen. That would be great. Our tanks had been outside the city for a few days and couldn't get any further because of the lack of petrol. The fuel trucks were often stuck, so the Ju-52s were constantly flying forward and landing next to the roads, bringing fuel to the tanks. In general, it's all down to fuel (which we will find in abundance in Baku). Ammunition is a small matter, since there isn't much gunfire.

So, now I shall finish again. My kindest regards.

Your Theo



German soldiers' field mail *was distributed through mobile mail centres that moved with the advance.*

What's around me is a very hell. There's wailing and roaring all around, the sky is splitting with the din. ■ **Soviet soldier Misha Volkov in a letter to his wife.**

which became more pronounced when under pressure. Now he faced a monumental and deadly order that would likely provoke deep frowns from his far more experienced colleagues. In the meantime, Paulus's troops thundered towards the Don River, where the Soviets lay buried in the landscape. With the help of Luftwaffe reconnaissance, the Germans had a fair idea of where the enemy's weak points were, and with fierce armoured assaults, the 6th Army effortlessly rolled over the Red Army's advance units one by one.

The Soviets had been pushed to the limit. In late July, Red Army Colonel Alexander Utvenko fought a brave battle to keep order in the ranks of the 33rd Guards Division, which was still defending the west bank. Here, German tanks and troops came close to cutting off Utvenko's unit.

"When I took command of the division, it was already on the defensive. On the 23rd of July the Germans had launched a massive attack with several divisions across a 22-kilometre stretch of our front. On our right flank, their tanks had broken through, and the division on our left flank had fallen back. I bent the flanks to form a circular defence... We would soon have been overrun if we hadn't dug in below head height. We were running out of munitions and provisions. The wounded were sent to the rear by night, on carts and camels."

Utvenko's troops were soon reduced to 2,000 men, and the colonel watched as several of his NCOs *"blew their own brains out"* in desperation. Day after day, the Soviet division thinned out. Utvenko's own life was in danger when enemy soldiers attacked and took up a gun position on a slope where the colonel lay:

"A shell hit me in the legs... The Germans were sitting up on the precipice, and I could hear them talking as I drifted in and out of consciousness. When it was dark, I and two other soldiers crawled out up to the next precipice."

For 24 hours, Utvenko hid with a total of 120 surviving Soviets in a sunflower field on the west bank of the Don. As the summer sun slipped beneath the horizon again, the men prepared to flee.

"We swam across the Don. Eight men drowned. By night, we mustered. I had a temperature of nearly 104 [40 degrees Celsius]," recalled Utvenko, who also suffered minor shrapnel wounds. A few weeks later, however, he was ready to fight again.

Germans eyed Stalingrad ahead

As Utvenko and many other Soviet units were busy finding new defensive positions in front of the Volga,



The Nazis abandoned the oil *that Red Army troops set on fire at the Maikop oil well as part of their scorched earth tactics.*

German tanks crossed the Don for the first time on pontoon bridges. The Germans also suffered heavy losses, and the soldiers were forced to dig holes for their fallen comrades beneath the summer sun, but spirits remained high. Some tank commanders even had the energy to stand in the turret wearing motorcycle goggles and singing as their heavy machines ground their way through the dust east of the Don, heading for Stalingrad.

For the Soviet soldiers, however, the sound of the advancing enemy was anything but sweet music.

"German tanks were moving on the roads with a rumbling noise. German dive-bombers were hanging over the Don crossings by day and by night... Smoke, fire, dust, terrible heat... On those days, men marching with their weapons felt like moaning and complaining, just like those who lay on the straw in villages, their bandages bloodstained, waiting for the ambulances to pick them up. The great nation's great army was retreating," noted war correspondent Vasily Grossman after the loss of Don.

The Red Army troops still battling ferociously at the front felt their nerves fraying. Soldier Misha Volkov described the doom and gloom: *"I don't have time to describe what's going on, but I can tell you that what's around me is a very hell. There's wailing and roaring all around, the sky is splitting with the din, but my eardrums are already used to it. One shell burst just three metres from me, and I was spattered with mud, but I'm still in one piece. But as to what will happen, I can give you no guarantees,"* read the letter to Volkov's wife, who remained behind the front with the couple's child.

But even though the Red Army had been pushed more than 600 kilometres backwards towards the Volga at the start of Hitler's summer offensive, and morale was undoubtedly high in the German army's camp, the most bellicose German soldiers in particular still feared for the future:

"It was almost as if we had two parts to our head. We were charging ahead exultantly and yet we knew that the enemy would attack again in the winter," wrote Lieutenant Clemens von Kageneck, who remembered well what had happened the previous year during Operation Barbarossa.

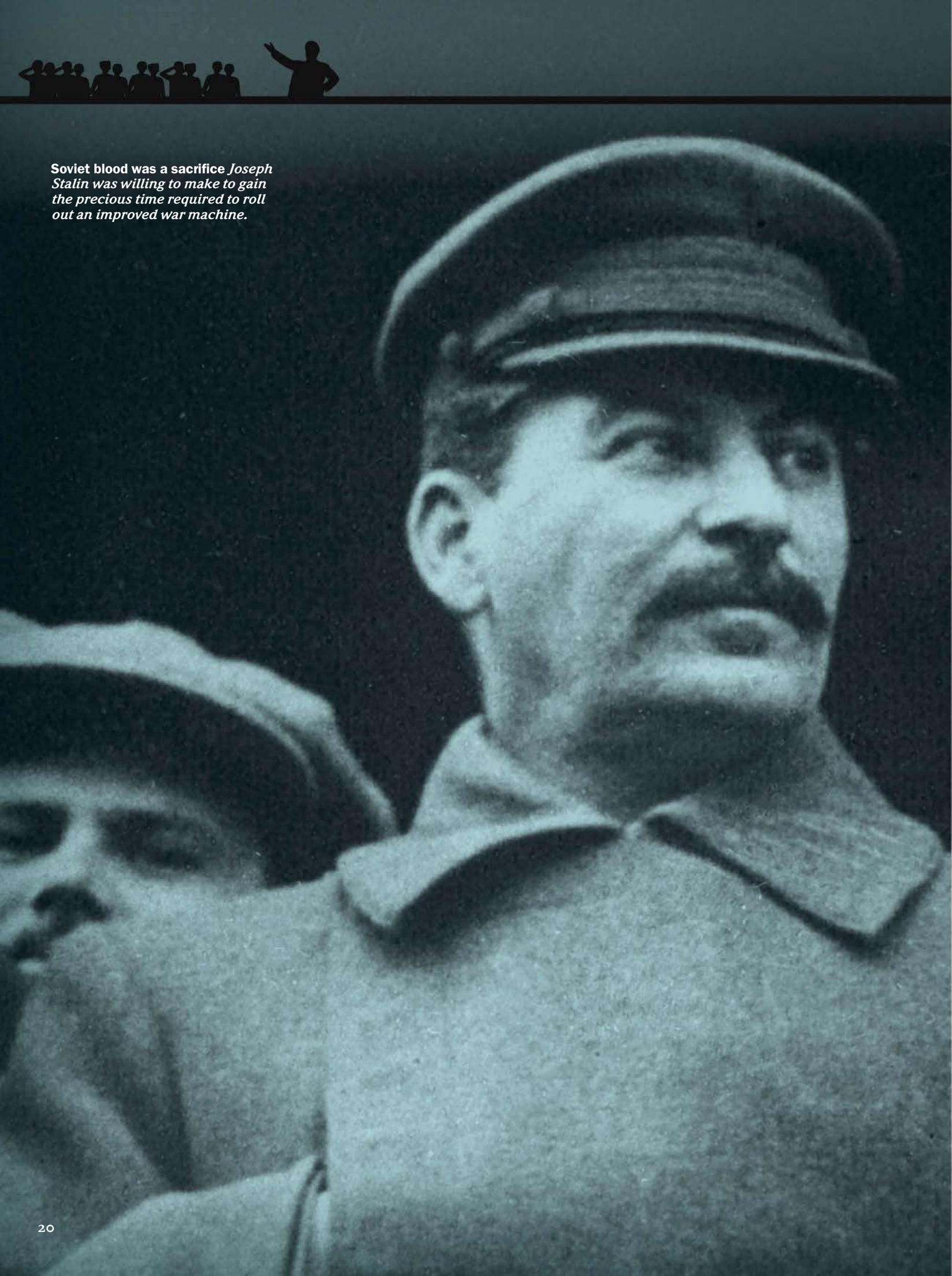
For the German troops, the triumphs of the summer of 1942 would form the last positive memories of the war. Now Stalin was determined to defend Stalingrad and the rest of Mother Russia with unprecedented harshness and cynicism. With Soviet blood, the battle would be turned. ■

The advance on the Volga was titled Operation *Fischreiher* (Heron).



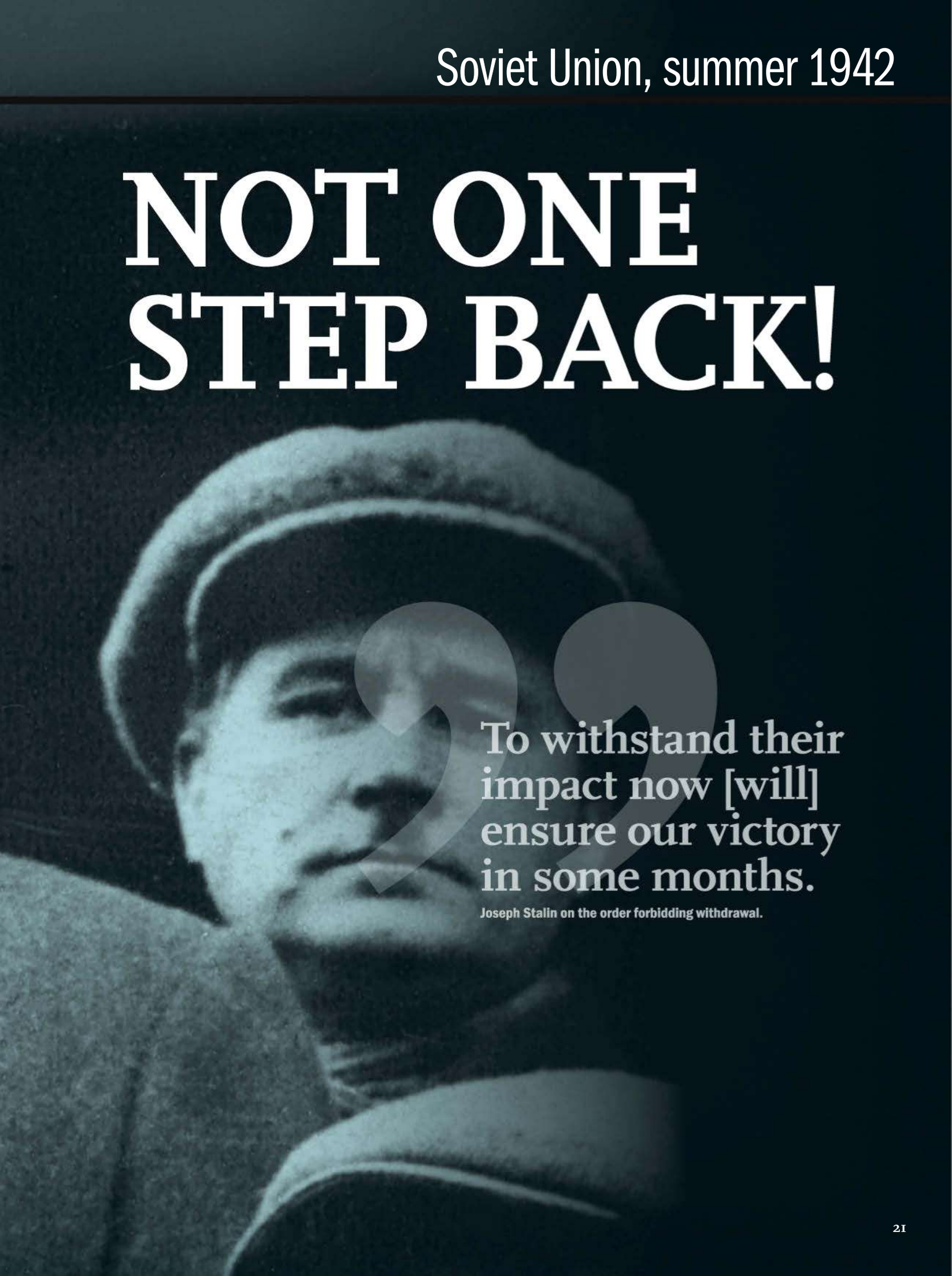
The heron caught fish and symbolised the hunt for food and raw materials in the Volga.





Soviet blood was a sacrifice *Joseph Stalin was willing to make to gain the precious time required to roll out an improved war machine.*

NOT ONE STEP BACK!



> To withstand their impact now [will] ensure our victory in some months.
>
> Joseph Stalin on the order forbidding withdrawal.

Not one step back!

As the Nazis stormed across the steppes, Joseph Stalin issued a cynical order: if a soldier took one step backwards on Soviet soil, the penalty would be death. The USSR would exchange blood for time. As Red Army soldiers were led to the slaughter in Stalingrad, Stalin's generals would build a gigantic army behind the front lines.

By Troels Ussing

In the ruby-red office of the Kremlin on 28th July 1942, Joseph Stalin struggled for peace of mind. The map of the Eastern Front plagued him. Every time the Soviet leader had glanced at the military map over the previous month, the front line had moved in one direction only: east. Reports of lost cities and burnt farmland came in on a daily basis. And now Stalin's chief of staff, General Aleksandr Vasilevsky, was again reporting on defeats and setbacks across the long front.

"They've forgotten my Stavka Order!" Stalin yelled. His subordinate knew better than most about the order issued by the Soviet Armed Forces high command in August 1941. The Stavka order stated that *"anyone who removes his insignia during battle and surrenders should be regarded as a malicious deserter"*.

"They've forgotten it!" Stalin repeated. *"Write a new one on the same lines."*

"When do you want me to report with the new order?" Vasilevsky asked the seething Soviet leader.

"Today. Come back as soon as it is ready."

Vasilevsky left Stalin's rooms and formulated a draft before the sun set behind Moscow's domes and spires. Stalin read through it and made numerous revisions until he was satisfied with the wording of Order Number 227, which dealt with measures to strengthen discipline and order in the Red Army while prohibiting any unauthorised withdrawals from combat positions. One forceful sentence stood out to ensure the order would not be misunderstood:

"This leads to the conclusion, it is time to finish retreating. Not one step back!"



The medals hung heavily *on Aleksandr Vasilevsky's uniform. He distinguished himself as a master strategist during the Battle of Moscow.*

Soviets required blood sacrifice

Stalin and his closest advisers knew the situation was critical. At the end of July, the Germans still found it all too easy to push numerous Soviet forces back towards the Volga.

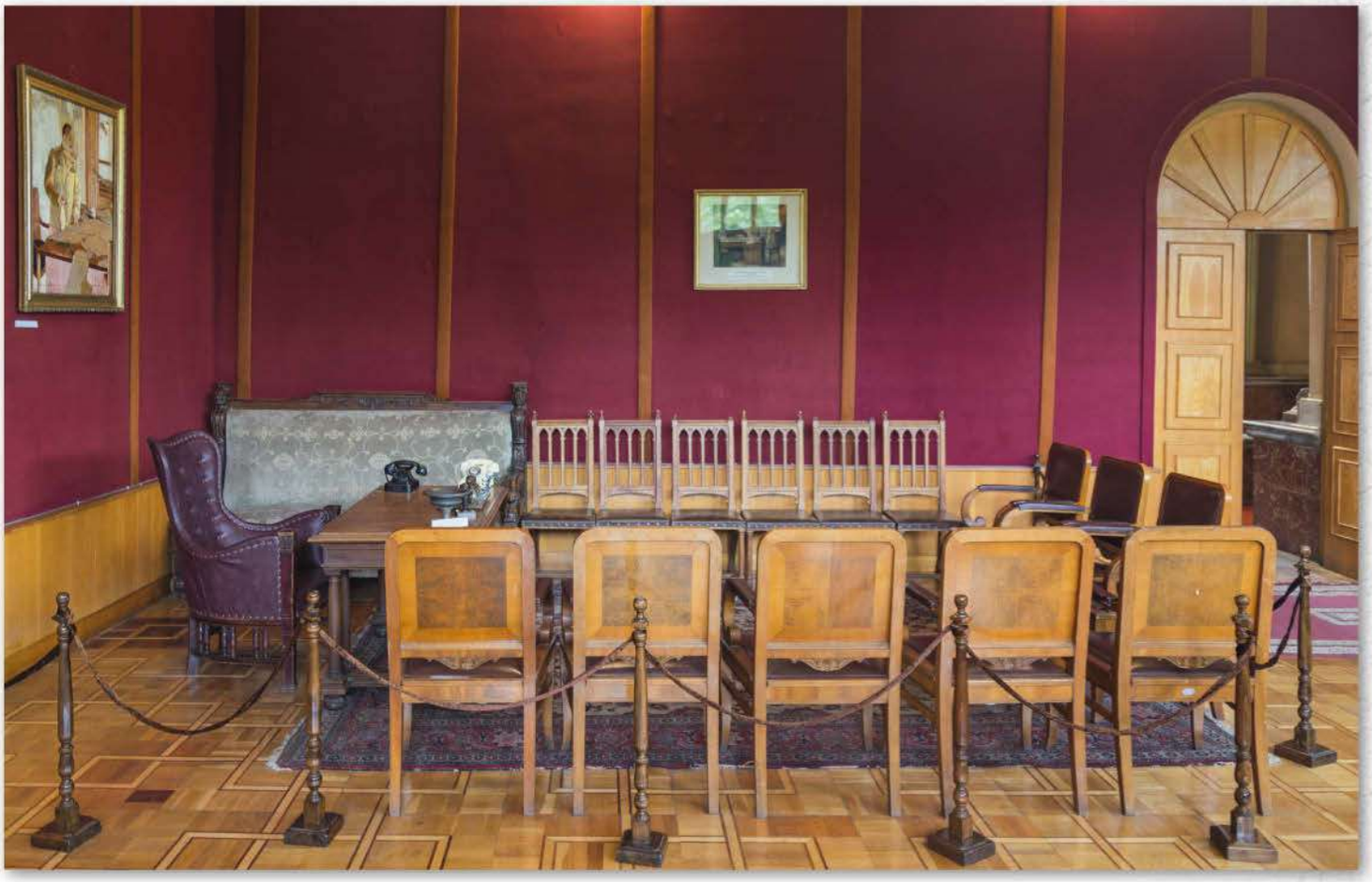
"Therefore it is necessary to eliminate talk that we have the capability endlessly to retreat, that we have a lot of territory, that our country is great and rich, that there is a large population, and that bread always will be abundant. Such talk is false and parasitic, it weakens us and benefits the enemy, if we do not stop retreating we will be without bread, without fuel, without metal, without raw material, without factories and plants, without railways," read the exhortation in Order 227.

Rearmament behind the front was underway, but new guns, tanks and aircraft wouldn't roll out of the factory until late autumn. The Red Army had to find a way of stopping the enemy's advance to gain time.

"To withstand their impact now, means to ensure our victory in some months," assured Stalin, who wanted those officers and soldiers who – according to the Soviet leader – were betraying the nation with their cowardly retreats:

"We should establish in our army the most stringent order and solid discipline, if we want to salvage the situation, and to keep our Motherland... Panic-mongers and cowards must be destroyed on the spot... Henceforth the solid law of discipline for each commander, Red Army soldier and commissar should be the requirement – not a single step back without order from higher command... It is necessary to defend each position, each metre of our territory, up to the last drop of blood, to cling for each plot of Soviet land and to defend it as long as possible."

Stalin and his generals planned to use that blood to buy time. Inside and outside Stalingrad, thousands



The red colour of Communism *adorned the walls of Joseph Stalin's office in the Kremlin, the heart of the Soviet government in Moscow.*

upon thousands of Soviets would be sacrificed in a dogged defence to keep the enemy occupied in the city while the Communist leaders amassed a gigantic army of fresh troops and weapons. For Vasilevsky, the order represented a harsh but necessary calculation in a moment of crisis.

"Order No. 227 is one of the most powerful documents of the war years due to its patriotic and emotional content ... the document was motivated by rough and dark times," the general later wrote in his memoirs.

Soviets hit by both joy and fear

As Stalin's personal emissary, the steely General Georgy Zhukov was given the honour of hammering the importance of Order 227 into the Red Army. In early August, the 45-year-old general, who'd proved his worth in the defences of Leningrad and Moscow, headed south to ensure that army commanders there would comply with the new order to the letter and *"unconditionally eliminate retreat moods in the troops"*. The order's instruction was to set up special control units to keep soldiers in an iron grip:

"Form within the limits of each army three to five well-armed defensive squads (up to 200 persons in each)... Put them directly behind unstable divisions and require them ... to shoot in place panic-mongers and cowards and thus help the honest soldiers of the division execute their duty to the Motherland."

Officers who permitted unregulated retreats would in future be demoted and imprisoned or redeployed to Shtrafbats, special penal battalions where an even grimmer fate awaited. These units would be placed at the very front, where they might be tasked with operating deep behind German positions or as minesweepers. In other words, cowardly behaviour would be punished with something close to certain death, yet both officers and soldiers of the Red Army welcomed the new disciplinary rules when they were presented to them.

"We have read Stalin's Order No. 227. He openly recognises the catastrophic situation in the south," wrote political commissar Nikolai Moskvin in his diary. *"But at least Stalin is on our side! ... So, not a step back! It's timely and it's just."*

"We all knew where we stood after we had heard it. And we all – it's true – felt better. Yes, we felt better," claimed officer Lev Lvovich, while a private infantryman was left to lament that Stalin's order hadn't arrived sooner: *"If this order had been issued at the beginning of June, then our*▸

The slogan "Not one step back" appeared on this stamp from the war.



The Soviet Union exploited the use of stamps for worldwide propaganda.

ORDER NO. 227

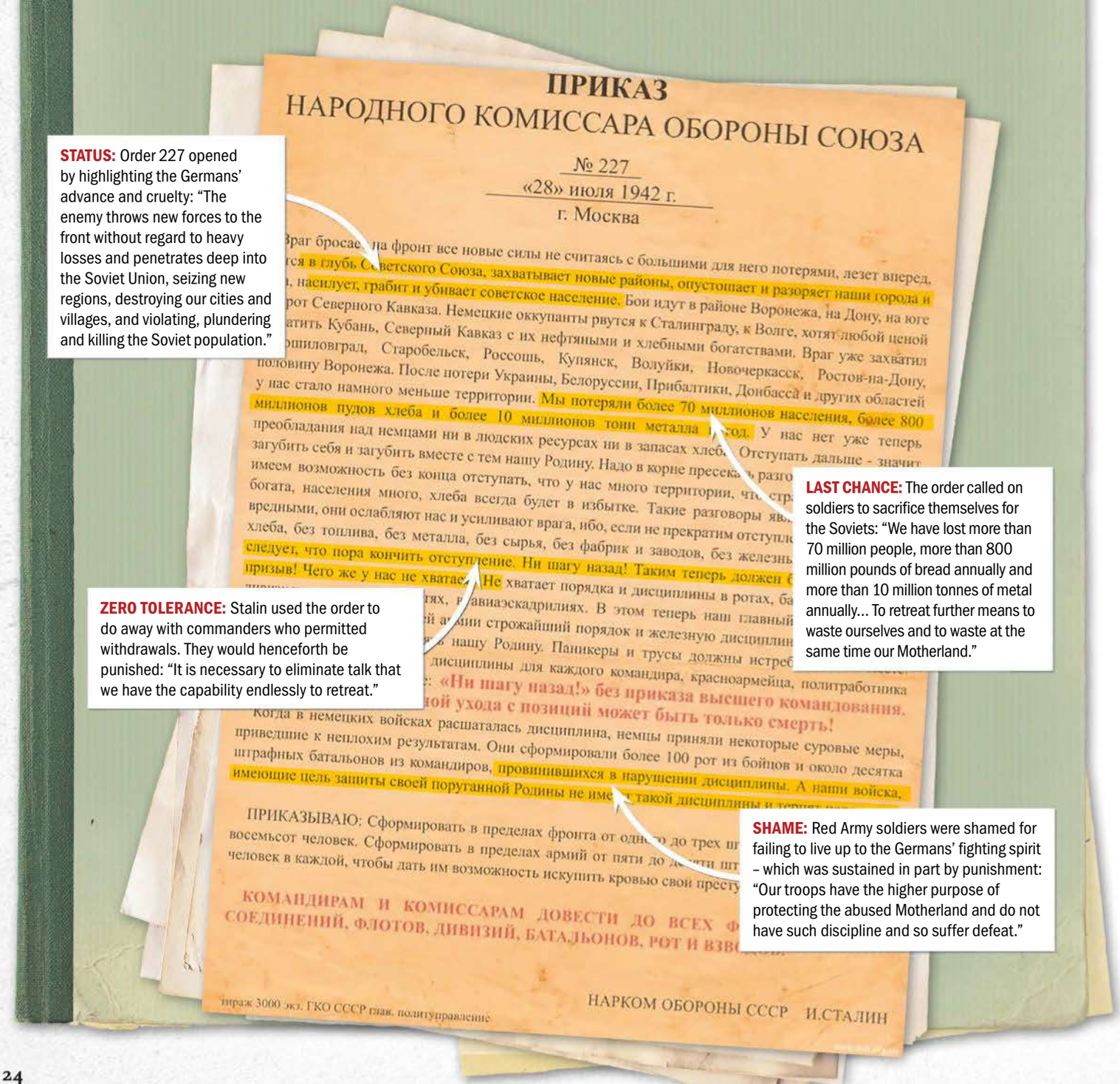
28th July 1942

One million punished by death warrant

Stalin's Order 227 was intended to put an abrupt end to the Soviet retreat through a merciless system of punishment. Over one million soldiers paid the price for the order's hard-line message: "Not one step back."

As the Red Army retreated rapidly across the steppes, Joseph Stalin signed Order 227. It imposed a new zero-tolerance policy on both officers and men who failed to meet the Soviet leader's demands for proper behaviour at the front. In August 1942, 193 new penal divisions were set up to punish "cowards and defeatists".

During the war, 994,300 Red Army soldiers were sentenced by the platoons under the new rules; 427,910 were transferred to penal companies, while 135,000 were executed. The rest ended up in labour camps or prisons. In all, over a million soldiers fell victim to Stalin's iron fist; some were shot instantly by their compatriots if their nerves failed at the front, and they could be viewed as cowards or deserters.


ПРИКАЗ
НАРОДНОГО КОМИССАРА ОБОРОНЫ СОЮЗА
№ 227
«28» июля 1942 г.
г. Москва
Враг бросает на фронт все новые силы не считаясь с большими для него потерями, лезет вперед, ...тся в глубь Советского Союза, захватывает новые районы, опустошает и разоряет наши города и ..., насилует, грабит и убивает советское население. Бои идут в районе Воронежа, на Дону, на юге ...рот Северного Кавказа. Немецкие оккупанты рвутся к Сталинграду, к Волге, хотят любой ценой ...атить Кубань, Северный Кавказ с их нефтяными и хлебными богатствами. Враг уже захватил ...шиловград, Старобельск, Россошь, Купянск, Волуйки, Новочеркасск, Ростов-на-Дону, половину Воронежа. После потери Украины, Белоруссии, Прибалтики, Донбасса и других областей у нас стало намного меньше территории. Мы потеряли более 70 миллионов населения, более 800 миллионов пудов хлеба и более 10 миллионов тонн металла в год. У нас нет уже теперь преобладания над немцами ни в людских ресурсах ни в запасах хлеба. Отступать дальше - значит загубить себя и загубить вместе с тем нашу Родину. Надо в корне пресечь разго... имеем возможность без конца отступать, что у нас много территории, что стр... богата, населения много, хлеба всегда будет в избытке. Такие разговоры яв... вредными, они ослабляют нас и усиливают врага, ибо, если не прекратим отступле... хлеба, без топлива, без металла, без сырья, без фабрик и заводов, без железны... следует, что пора кончить отступление. Ни шагу назад! Таким теперь должен б... призыв! Чего же у нас не хватает? Не хватает порядка и дисциплины в ротах, ба... ...тях, в авиаэскадрилиях. В этом теперь наш главный ...ей армии строжайший порядок и железную дисциплин... ...нашу Родину. Паникеры и трусы должны истреб... дисциплины для каждого командира, красноармейца, политработника ...: «Ни шагу назад!» без приказа высшего командования. ...ой ухода с позиций может быть только смерть!
Когда в немецких войсках расшаталась дисциплина, немцы приняли некоторые суровые меры, приведшие к неплохим результатам. Они сформировали более 100 рот из бойцов и около десятка штрафных батальонов из командиров, провинившихся в нарушении дисциплины. А наши войска, имеющие цель защиты своей поруганной Родины не имеют такой дисциплины и терпят ...
ПРИКАЗЫВАЮ: Сформировать в пределах фронта от одно... до трех ш... восемьсот человек. Сформировать в пределах армий от пяти до ...ти ш... человек в каждой, чтобы дать им возможность искупить кровью свои прест...
КОМАНДИРАМ И КОМИССАРАМ ДОВЕСТИ ДО ВСЕХ ... СОЕДИНЕНИЙ, ФЛОТОВ, ДИВИЗИЙ, БАТАЛЬОНОВ, РОТ И ВЗ...
НАРКОМ ОБОРОНЫ СССР И.СТАЛИН
Тираж 3000 экз. ГКО СССР глав. политуправление

STATUS: Order 227 opened by highlighting the Germans' advance and cruelty: "The enemy throws new forces to the front without regard to heavy losses and penetrates deep into the Soviet Union, seizing new regions, destroying our cities and villages, and violating, plundering and killing the Soviet population."

LAST CHANCE: The order called on soldiers to sacrifice themselves for the Soviets: "We have lost more than 70 million people, more than 800 million pounds of bread annually and more than 10 million tonnes of metal annually... To retreat further means to waste ourselves and to waste at the same time our Motherland."

ZERO TOLERANCE: Stalin used the order to do away with commanders who permitted withdrawals. They would henceforth be punished: "It is necessary to eliminate talk that we have the capability endlessly to retreat."

SHAME: Red Army soldiers were shamed for failing to live up to the Germans' fighting spirit – which was sustained in part by punishment: "Our troops have the higher purpose of protecting the abused Motherland and do not have such discipline and so suffer defeat."

division would have fought harder in Ukraine and may not have ended up in the Stalingrad region."

While fear of reprisals made it difficult for any Soviet to express anything but positivity over the order, some were less confident: *"As the divisional commander read it, the people stood rigid. It made our skin crawl,"* noted one correspondent.

In August, cordon units were rolled out. Behind the front, they began the hunt for cowards and alarmists within the army. Within a few weeks, some 13,500 soldiers had been executed by their compatriots during the defence of Stalingrad.

War correspondent Vasily Grossman heard about one of these *"extraordinary events"*, the official Soviet term for the sentencing of a potential *"traitor to the motherland"*. In many cases, these were simply soldiers suffering from shock and stress:

"An extraordinary event. Sentence. Execution. They undressed him and buried him. At night, he came back to his unit, in his bloodstained underwear [having somehow survived the first execution]. *They shot him again."*

In many situations, officers – even among the lower ranks – took unilateral action to comply with Stalin's order if a soldier in their unit turned out to be weak. Colonel Aleksandr Utvenko reported one such experience when his division was in close combat:

"One man took a leaflet out of his pocket and started walking towards the Germans. Galya, a woman interpreter on our staff, shouted: 'Look at him! The snake is going to surrender!' and she shot him with her pistol."

The Red Army was transformed

Punishment wasn't the only form of motivation that Stalin and Zhukov used to raise the Red Army's morale. As a counterbalance, they also changed the rules to ensure troops were rewarded more frequently for brave service. From 1941 to 1945, the Soviets awarded 11 million medals and honours, almost eight times as many as the Americans. Each order came with specific rewards, such as extra meat in rations. Soldiers' morale was also bolstered by a simple trick. From late August, women behind the front line stood by with washboards and large tubs of boiling water to scrub and wash dirt and lice off the foot soldiers' soiled combat uniforms. The washing was gruelling and often led to eczema, but it worked:

"Nina, don't worry about our uniforms. We dress better these days than any commander▸

FACTS

Brutality against your own soldiers often has the opposite effect.

212,400

soldiers from the Red Army deserted and surrendered to the Axis powers during the war.



Torture, execution and genocide *were common tactics for NKVD troops enforcing Stalin's order forbidding withdrawal. The NKVD later became the dreaded KGB.*

I don't know if any population could be strong enough to carry this terrible burden. ■ War correspondent Vasily Grossman on Soviet casualties.





A political commissar storms ahead ***in Ukraine in 1942. These men had to imprint Communist ideology on their units.***

from the capitalist countries," wrote one officer in a letter to his wife.

The military also expressed a desire to recruit *"healthy young girls"* by the hundreds of thousands, and recruitment accelerated in summer 1942. Their blood, too, would flow to further Stalin's war plans, though it proved hard on the girls' families, where the father had often already been drafted and may even have long since died at the front.

"I don't know if any population could be strong enough to carry this terrible burden. The tragic emptiness of the villages. Girls are driven away in vehicles. They are crying, and their mothers are crying, because their daughters are being taken away to the army," Grossman wrote from the countryside behind the front.

The women underwent the same training as their male counterparts and were trained in artillery and as machine gunners. Many became snipers.

"We learned to mount and demount a sniper's rifle with closed eyes, to determine wind velocity, to evaluate the movement of the target and the distance to it, to dig in and crawl... The most difficult thing was to get up at the sound of alarm and to get ready in five minutes. We would take boots a size or so bigger so as not to lose much time putting them on," recalled one veteran who, like all female soldiers, had to initially accept that uniforms and footwear only came in men's sizes.

The sight of women in the Red Army in 1942 became the rule rather than the exception. Their presence was also intended to motivate male soldiers. For who would want to behave in a cowardly manner when women were present?

Basic training wore down young soldiers

To build his gigantic army, Zhukov found himself busily training young teenage boys. After just three months, the young guns were ready to be thrown to the wolves. Their carefree youth was over.

"All our lessons are in the open air. We have to sit for eight hours in scorching sun, which sometimes means that nothing sticks in our heads... We're getting used to it a bit now, but we're all terribly tired," wrote Aleksandr Karp, who'd only finished school that summer before being sent to the front in the autumn. He wasn't alone.

"Army life is cruel," wrote 19-year-old Anatoly Viktorov in a letter to his father. *"In a short time you have to develop courage, boldness, resourcefulness, and quite apart from that, the ability to hit the enemy accurately with a gun. You don't get any of these qualities as a free gift."*

The intense training conditioned the young recruits to work without rest. Since most had also grown up with war, it felt natural for them to sacrifice themselves for the motherland. Their sense of duty ▸

All Red Army forces in the Stalingrad battle received a medal.



759,560 civilians, officers and soldiers received the honour.



T-34 tanks poured out *of Soviet factories, thanks to workers transferred to Tankograd in the east.*

contrasted sharply with the older soldiers who'd seen their comrades fall during the war's first 14 months.

"We, young soldiers, don't even think of home, it's mostly older soldiers who do... We, the young soldiers who are properly brought up and conscientious, we endure all this with patience, but the moods of older soldiers are worse than ever," one teenager told war correspondent Grossman.

The generational change in the Red Army had provided Stalin and Zhukov with the self-sacrificing war machine they dreamed of. But the young troops' imminent battle at Stalingrad would depend first on the work going on in the factories and fields behind the front. Without efficient, constant production of weapons and food at a blistering pace, the Soviets would have to forget about striking back in the autumn.

Hinterland was where battle was won

In the late summer of 1942, the Soviets possessed precious knowledge the outside world knew nothing about – least of all the Germans. In Berlin, the Nazis estimated Soviet steel production at eight million tonnes. In reality, the Eastern giant was producing 13.5 million tonnes. At the same time, the war production of the Axis powers was shrinking, and Stalin had cause to be optimistic.

"Can we withstand the impact, and then throw back the enemy to the west? Yes we can, because our factories and plants in the rear are fine and our army receives ever more and more aeroplanes, tanks, artillery and mortars," the head of state announced. According to Zhukov, *"Urgent measures were being taken to boost the production of aircraft, tanks, guns, ammunition and other equipment, so that they would be available in time."*

On the other side of the Urals in particular, dense smoke rose from factories in the new industrial centre near the city of Chelyabinsk, popularly known as Tankograd – Tank City. While the Soviets only manufactured 3,000 of the famous T-34 tanks in 1941, production reached a staggering 12,500 in 1942 – the vast majority of which were manufactured the second half of the year.

In addition, engineers used creative thinking to reuse the bodies of old light tanks in the production of new motorised guns. The manufacture of war materiel could be kept running at full steam, thanks mainly to forced labour. Here Stalin's Order 227 proved ▸

STRENGTH RATIO

In 1942, **Nazi Germany produced a total of**

5,530

armoured vehicles. In the same year, **the Soviet Union produced**

25,563

tanks and other armoured vehicles.

...mobilised millions of soldiers

Fear, fervour and rushed training fed the front line with a massive flow of fresh Soviets to help meet Stalin's ruthless calculation: the Red Army could raise new soldiers faster than the Nazis could shoot them.

Stalin had already ordered all men over 19 to enlist in the army in 1941. Later, men from 17 to 50 years of age were conscripted. A large proportion of Soviets volunteered for the army in order to gain honour. Many even lied about their age to sign up. On the other hand, the state made sure it was almost impossible to avoid the call-up. The penalty for not turning in those family members who tried to avoid the army was ten years in the Gulag. This was how Stalin ensured that all conscripts went to war.

To guarantee enough soldiers to defend Stalingrad, the induction period was reduced to two or three months. Often, training was so basic that new recruits weren't even familiar with their weapons before being sent to war.

One soldier recounted how they were given sticks instead of rifles during training before being told that they'd learn to fight and survive at the harsh reality of the front.

From late summer 1942, women volunteers flooded into the army, and by 1945 some 800,000 were serving. Across the Soviet Union, trains constantly thundered across the country carrying fresh supplies of soldiers. In 1942, the Soviet Union could muster six million troops at the front. By November, some 1.2 million of them were at Stalingrad.



A woman often lay behind *the sniper's sights. Around one in four Soviet snipers who received formal training were women.*

Penal units sent on suicide missions

During the war, both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union established penal companies for soldiers who violated military edicts. The men in these units came from prisons and asylums.

In Nazi Germany, criminals, violent offenders and inmates from mental hospitals were assigned to a variety of penal companies and battalions from the outbreak of war in 1939. These units were under the command of the German military police and were typically poorly armed. When not performing physically demanding forced labour, the units were forced into suicide missions such as crossing minefields, defending hopeless positions and storming the battlefield.

During the war, over 50,000 Germans served in such punishment units. Inspired by the Germans, Stalin raised the number of penal troops, which largely consisted of deserters, cowards and "enemies of the people" – opponents of the regime. The first new unit was deployed in Stalingrad. Three days later, 600 of its 929 men were dead.

"We thought it would be better than a prison camp. We didn't realise at the time that it was just a death sentence," said Ivan Gorin, one of the few to survive his sentence.





Rapists and murderers *were part of the unscrupulous Dirlewanger Brigade, a notorious Nazi penal unit.*

timely. Defeatists and cowards could also be sent to work in factories, where they had to toil with little food. The same fate awaited the children of the Communists' political opponents. One of them was young Ilya Nemanov, who was sent to the Siberian industrial town of Zlatoust before later boarding a train to Stalingrad. Nemanov knew well which of the two he preferred:

"It is not at the front that war is frightening. It's when … you have exhausting work to do, when people are dropping around you for no reason, when there's hunger, when there's no way you can help yourself – except by risking your life – when they give you frozen potatoes to eat, when you'll even eat carrion, when you'll take the rations off a dead comrade. That's what's frightening, not bullets!"

Even ordinary conscripts like Alexander Karp were used as farmhands for part of their training to provide food for the army. As the autumn rains began to fall, Karp toiled on meagre rations with his comrades in the potato fields:

"The work is very hard. It was all made far worse this time by the fact that it was very cold and there was even rain with hail in it from time to time. The earth was cold and wet and it was terribly hard to dig in it, looking for spuds… We were all black and filthy, knackered. We worked without a break. They gave us half an hour for lunch. We ate it with the same dirty hands that we had been digging with."

Women also played a key role in the hinterland behind the front, both in agriculture and in the factories, doing much of the work that their brothers and husbands couldn't do because they were at the front. Vasily Grossman saw first-hand the constant toil of women as he travelled around the Stalingrad region, observing them repairing the roads so that war materiel could get to the front.

"Thin women and girls wearing shawls on their heads are working on the road, loading earth on wooden handbarrows, levelling uneven places using picks and spades," wrote the correspondent with unabashed appreciation:

"Women are carrying on their shoulders the great burden of work. Women dominate. They are coping with an enormous amount of work and send bread, aircraft, weapons and ammunition to the front… There's no reproach in [their eyes], not a bitter word."

Stalingrad was prepped for defence

Joseph Stalin had ordered that the industrial city that bore his name be defended to the last drop of blood. The grey concrete city found itself turned into a construction site, to Zhukov's delight:

"Defence lines and fortified areas were energetically prepared on the approaches to Stalingrad. As at Moscow, thousands of citizens came out to build fortifications and laboured devotedly to prepare the city for defence."

In reality, residents didn't have much choice. As Communist citizens, they simply did as the Stalingrad Defence Committee commanded. And the tone of its demands were clear:

"We will not abandon our city to the Germans! All of you, organise brigades, go to build

barricades. Barricade every street … quickly in such a way so that the soldiers defending Stalingrad will destroy the enemy without mercy!" the order went, and on the city walls posters appeared proclaiming: *"We shall never surrender the city of our birth… Let us transform each district, each block, each building into an impregnable fortress."*

In the area around Stalingrad, all women aged between 16 and 55 were gathered into workers' brigades and equipped with long-handled shovels, small carts and timber, which they used to dig tank traps around two metres deep in front of the city. Younger children aged two to eight watched curiously from the sidelines as sappers buried anti-tank mines nearby. School-aged children constructed earth ramparts around the fuel depots on the Volga shore, and industrial workers in the town worked flat out to produce as many weapons and tanks as possible.

"The factories were working at full capacity. All kinds of weaponry were set up right there in the compounds, lifted up to the rooftops by crane. Tanks rolled in. People in the workers settlements were feeling lively and cheerful. They constructed bunkers and bomb shelters, made water reservoirs. Apart from that liveliness, there was nothing unusual about them," noted Lieutenant Aleksey Zimin. Meanwhile, other citizens of Stalingrad tried to keep up with daily chores and duties.

"Even though the front was so close, life went on as usual. Caretakers were still watering the plants. Housewives, having grown used to frequent enemy air raids, hurried to get to the shops and the market. Women would take their children with them. It broke my heart to see this: what would become of them? The enemy is already at the gate," wrote Alexei Chuyanov, first secretary of the Stalingrad Regional Committee, at the end of August.

Everyday life kept the worry at arm's length for a while, but as the war drew closer, smiles stiffened in the streets. *"On those anxiety-filled days, when the thunder of fighting could be heard in the suburbs of Stalingrad, when at night one could see rockets shot far away into the sky, and pale blue rays of searchlights roamed the sky, when the first trucks, disfigured by shrapnel, carrying the wounded and the belongings of retreating headquarters appeared in the streets of the city … fear found its way into a lot of hearts,"* wrote Grossman shortly after arriving in the city.

Amid the misery, however, hope also ▸

Propaganda posters stressed the Soviets' duty to work.



"All for the front! All for victory!" was the poster's message.

Scandinavian volunteers *fought on the German side on the Eastern Front in 1942. Finns were also part of SS-Division Wiking, which attacked along the southern front of Fall Blau.*

burned, noted British war correspondent Alexander Werth: *"Black as things are, I somehow feel that Stalingrad is going to provide something very big,"* he wrote.

Generals devised cunning plan

Stalin was furious when he heard on 3rd September 1942 that the Germans were outside Stalingrad. On 10th September, when the Soviet 62nd Army found itself surrounded by the enemy on the west side of the Volga and cut off from the 64th Army, Stalin summoned Zhukov to Moscow.

Chief of Staff Vasilevsky was also in Stalin's office when Zhukov entered the Kremlin two days later. Stalin reached for the map showing the army reserves and placed it in front of the generals before demanding a concrete and detailed strategy for how the Red Army would deploy the new reserves and weapons that the triumvirate had been discussing the month before.

"Now look here," Stalin said, *"you had better go to the General Staff and think out what has to be done in the Stalingrad area. What troops should be moved in to strengthen the Stalingrad concentration and where from."*

Zhukov headed off with his compatriot to devise a strategic counterweight to the German advance.

"Vasilevsky and I spent all the next day working at the General Staff. We concentrated on the possibility of a large-scale operation that would enable us to avoid squandering our prepared and half-prepared reserves on isolated operations. In October we should be completing the formation of the strategic reserves. By that time our industry would have substantially increased its output of

Partisans armed to the teeth *cut lines of communication, fouled the water and rendered useless the territory lost to the Germans.*



Black as things are, I somehow feel that Stalingrad is going to provide something very big. ■ **British war correspondent Alexander Werth while in Stalingrad.**

the latest types of aircraft and of ammunition for the artillery," he later wrote.

"After discussing all the possible options, we decided to offer Stalin the following plan of action: first, continue to wear down the enemy by an active defence; second, prepare for a counteroffensive that would hit the enemy in the Stalingrad area hard enough to radically change the strategic situation in the south of the country in our favour... We clearly saw that the main blows must be struck at the flanks of the Stalingrad concentration, which was covered by Romanian troops. A preliminary calculation indicated that the necessary forces and weapons for the counteroffensive could not be assembled before the middle of November."

The major counteroffensive was code-named Operation Uranus. With the plans drawn on the military map, the generals again set their sights on Stalingrad. If the counter-attack was to succeed and the Soviets made capable of capturing the German 6th Army in November in a pincer manoeuvre, the tortured city had to be held. Two tough months awaited the Soviet 62nd Army in the city bearing Stalin's name. With Zhukov's blessing, General Yeremenko decided to appoint a new commander for the beleaguered army in Stalingrad. The task would require a tough general not prone to panic and with an iron will beyond the ordinary. Yeremenko knew just the man for the job. His name was Vassily Chuikov.

Yeromenko and his right-hand man in the Stalingrad Front, future Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, received Chuikov at their headquarters east of the Volga in mid-September to inform the general about his new role.

"Comrade Chuikov, how do you interpret your task?" Khrushchev asked during the meeting.

"We will defend the city or die in the attempt," Chuikov replied resolutely.

The same day, Chuikov crossed the Volga, where after much difficulty he found the 62nd Army's headquarters inside Stalingrad. By this time, large parts of the city were already in flames and buildings had collapsed under repeated German aerial bombardments. On arrival, the new army commander made it very clear to his subordinates that there was only one option for holding out in Stalingrad: the troops would have to pay with their lives.

"Time is blood," the general stated coolly. Soviet soldiers were about to start paying the price. ■

Stalingrad still holds a special place in the Russian national psyche.



This coin from 2013, for example, shows a memorial from the battle.



Tanks were slowed by trenches *dug by Soviet civilians along the Eastern Front. The digging was done by women and older men.*

WORKERS
were sent into battle

To the Red Army's surprise, Stalingrad suddenly became a target for the Germans. Taken off-guard, the Soviets hastily set up worker battalions, manned by factory employees who lacked proper weapons.

In August, the Luftwaffe had full control of the airspace, and the situation for the Red Army in Stalingrad was desperate. As a result, the city's women were ordered to dig defensive works, while the majority of men in the industrial centre's factories were recruited into poorly trained and ill-equipped worker battalions, which had to do everything possible to slow down their superior enemy. Propaganda from the Regional Council of Workers, among others, stated that the workers themselves had taken up arms to defend Stalingrad.

Although the propaganda was exaggerated, the worker battalions showed willing to sacrifice everything to protect their hometown. One reason may have been that their families were not allowed to leave Stalingrad; therefore, according to Soviet propaganda, they faced a horrific outcome if the city fell to the Germans.

Armed with spades

Up to 90 percent of the worker battalions had no weapons, but had to make do with knives, spades and crowbars, and be prepared for hand-to-hand combat. If the men were lucky, they could steal rifles from dead Germans.





The Red Army

Fewer than 20,000 regular soldiers protected the city as nearly 300,000 German combat troops launched their assault. In the ruins, they stood side by side with the worker battalions, which suffered horrendous losses.

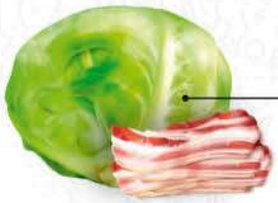
Worker battalions

The worker battalions were not given an easy ride, but were sent to the most desperate places on the front. One battalion, consisting of 1,000 men, returned at the end of August from a battle with only 22 survivors. But the battalion had slowed down a German attack, and the battle was therefore considered a success.



MORALE
was boosted by ballet

As the Germans made their inexorable approach to Stalingrad, Stalin ordered that life should go on as normal. The dictator believed that any evacuation or change of daily routine would be a humiliating admission that the city was under threat.



Markets stayed open

Until August, residents could still shop at the city's markets while the Luftwaffe dropped its bombs.



Children went to school

Schoolchildren were ordered back to the classroom when the summer holidays ended in August. Germans were already on the outskirts of the city.



Sport flourished

At the city's athletics stadium and chess schools, contests continued at great risk to athletes and spectators.

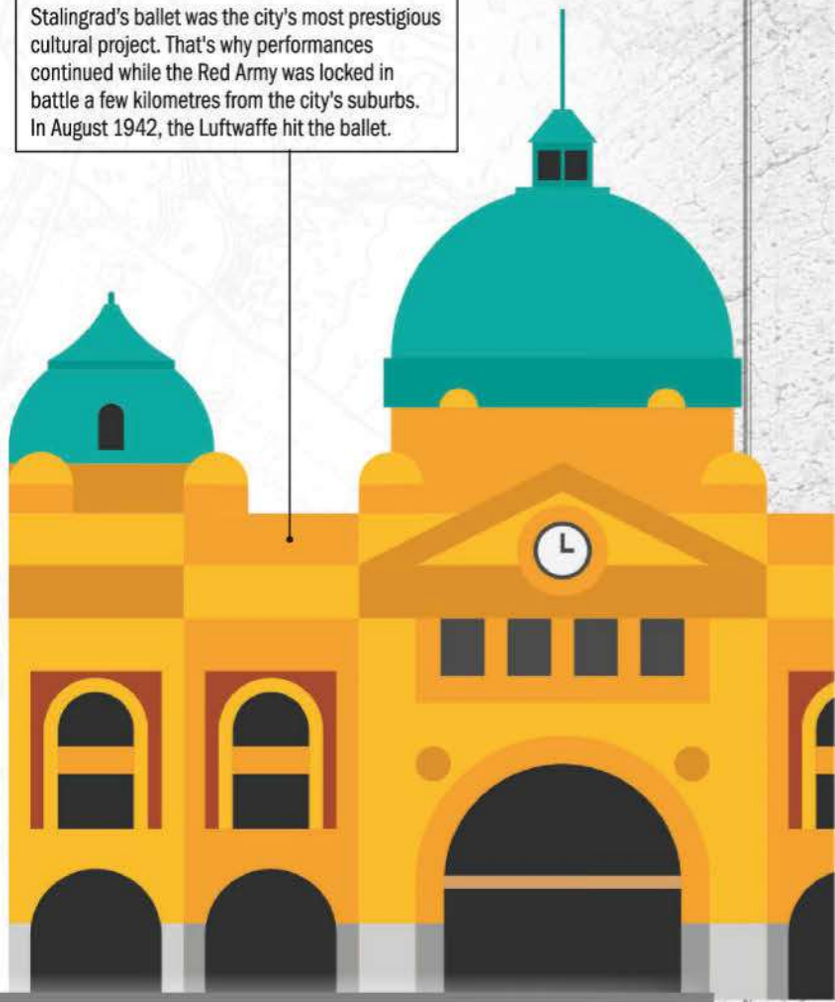


Kindergartens were open

Even the kindergartens stayed open, so mothers could help dig defences.

Ballet continued

Stalingrad's ballet was the city's most prestigious cultural project. That's why performances continued while the Red Army was locked in battle a few kilometres from the city's suburbs. In August 1942, the Luftwaffe hit the ballet.



Civilians were forced to stay in Stalingrad

Stalin was very clear. Stalingrad's 400,000 civilians had to stay in the city, and evacuation was forbidden. The Communist regime was convinced that the presence of civilians would boost the Red Army's morale and inspire it to fiercely defend the city. A few took the chance and fled to safety across the Volga River at night, but the majority of civilians remained.

Historians have no accurate count of civilian casualties during the battle, but agree that the losses were horrific and must be measured in tens of thousands. In addition, thousands of civilians were captured and forced to Germany, where they were conscripted into the SS regime's labour camps.

On top of that, grain in the city's stores was quickly transported to safety east of the city, leaving civilians to struggle with hunger, too.

TANKS
drove straight into battle

Stalingrad's Tractor Plant continued to operate until the Germans were just a few metres from the factory halls. Brand-new tanks eventually rolled to the front just 50 metres from the assembly line.

One of the leading architects of the day, the American **Albert Kahn** designed the Tractor Plant to be one of the most efficient in the world, capable of making vehicles at lightning speed.



Tractor Plant carried on

In October, the battles for buildings raged the hardest. In two days, the Luftwaffe bombed Soviet positions at the Tractor Plant 3,000 times, while production continued inside the halls. The Tractor Plant finally fell on 16th October.

Guns fired from the halls

Stalin organs, mortars and grenades rolled off the assembly lines and were immediately put into use. The Tractor Plant's weapons were crucial in September to prevent the fall of Stalingrad.

T-34 rolled into battle

No tanks could reach the city across the Volga, so brand-new T-34s from the assembly lines were the Soviets' only chance of getting heavy weapons into battle. Often, the fighting was so intense that they rolled out of the factory and had less than 50 metres to go before they reached the front line.

Tractor Plant was Soviet Union's most important factory

In 1942, Stalingrad's Tractor Plant was the second largest and most modern factory in the Soviet Union. Thousands of tanks rolled off the assembly lines – in particular, the T-34.

Production at the plant had begun 12 years earlier, when US experts helped the Soviets set up an assembly line to supply the country's agriculture with tractors.

By the time World War II broke out in September 1939, the Tractor Plant had produced a quarter of a million tractors, but the machinery was quickly diverted to making tanks and other weapons for the Red Army. When the Germans reached Stalingrad in the summer of 1942, the Tractor Plant was one of their first and most important targets, but in the maze of assembly lines and factory halls, the battle raged for months.

VOLGA was crucial

In 1942, most of Stalingrad was spread over the west bank of the Volga. But part of the city lay on the eastern side, and from there the Soviets had to keep their comrades in arms on the other bank supplied.

Thousands of soldiers *were ferried across the Volga to the front line every night. Often, only fewer than a hundred made it.*



Battle raged on west bank

The Battle of Stalingrad took place on the west bank. There, the city was reduced to rubble, and the Germans captured 90 percent of the urban area.

Injured taken to safety

There were no field hospitals in Stalingrad, because the Soviets could not get medicine and bandages across the Volga. The few wounded who reached the river were attended to by nurses and taken to the east bank at night in rowing boats.

Volga divided city

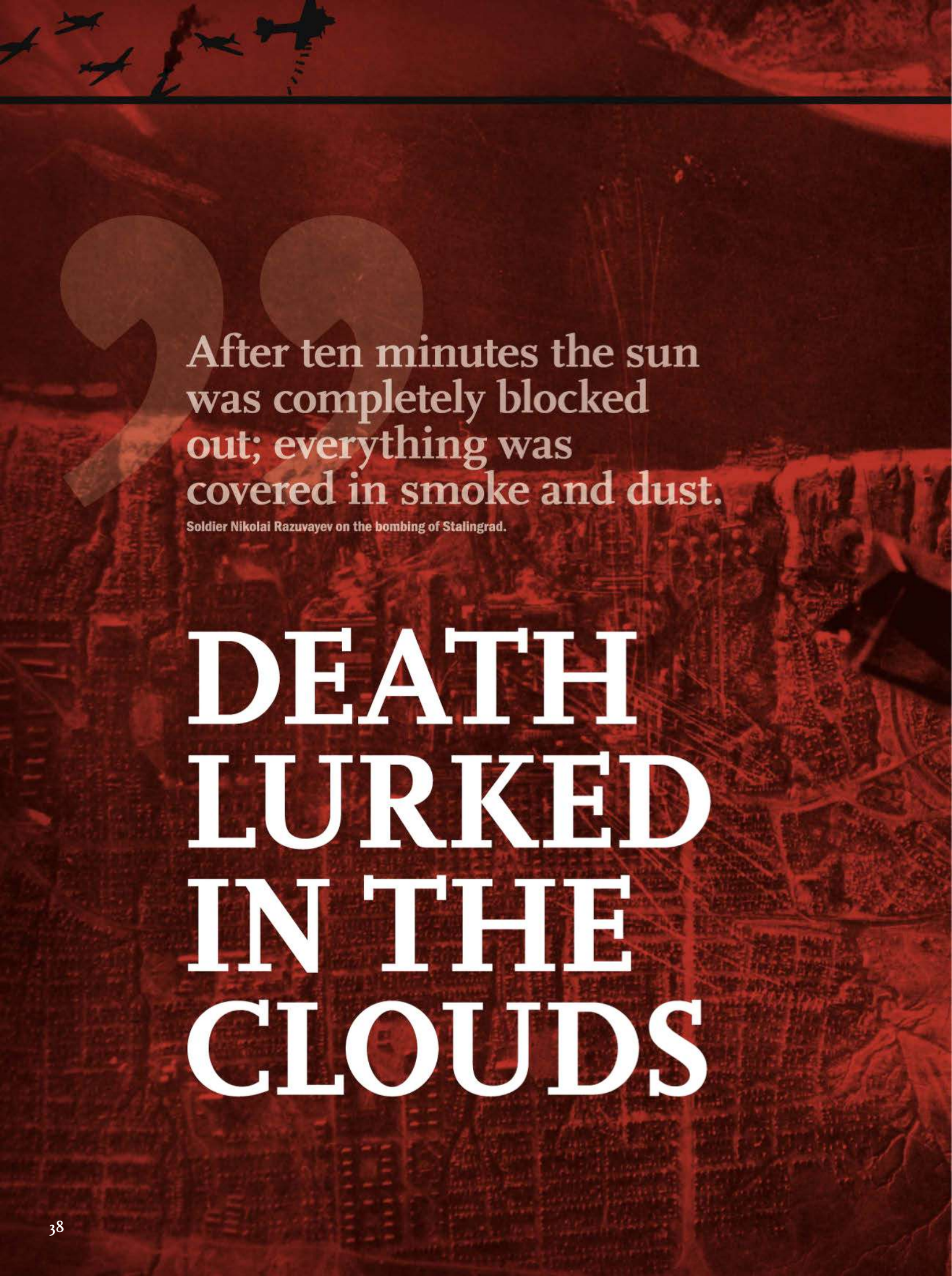
The river was under heavy German bombardment throughout the battle. According to eyewitnesses, the Volga flowed with corpses and broken boats, while the bank was covered with dead fish mixed with human heads, arms and legs.

Supplies to the front

From the safety of the east bank, the Soviets tried to send men, weapons and supplies across at night – with horrendous losses as the boats were fired upon by German guns and attacked by the Luftwaffe.

Soviets controlled east bank

The east bank was relatively sparsely populated, and there the Soviets had the opportunity to deploy powerful anti-aircraft guns. The east bank was therefore rarely targeted by the Luftwaffe.



> After ten minutes the sun was completely blocked out; everything was covered in smoke and dust.
>
> Soldier Nikolai Razuvayev on the bombing of Stalingrad.

DEATH LURKED IN THE CLOUDS

Stalingrad, summer/autumn 1942



One thousand bombs a day *for three months. The scale of the German air attack on Stalingrad meant it was quickly reduced to ruins.*

Death lurked in the clouds

On 23rd August 1942, bombs fell continuously as the war reached Stalingrad, and on this 'Black Sunday' the Luftwaffe massacred soldiers and civilians alike. As the Red Army took to the skies, its pilots' lack of skill was plain to see. But in the clouds over the city, day by day, the Soviets slowly turned the tide of war.

By Troels Ussing

FACTS

Germany's Luftflotte 4 was the **world's most powerful airborne division** in 1942. The fighter pilots in Jagdgeschwader 52, history's most successful air unit, provided cover for the bombers.

Shovels and hoes ploughed through topsoil compacted by the summer's heat, as women and children toiled to dig traps and erect barricades around Stalingrad. But the civilian population was well aware that even its hardest work couldn't keep the Germans out. Since the beginning of August, German bombers had roared across the skies above the city on the banks of the River Volga. The Luftwaffe commander on the Eastern Front, Wolfram von Richthofen, noted with satisfaction in his diary on 21st August that "blood flowed!" as he passed over an area east of Stalingrad in his small Fieseler Storch liaison plane. His bombers massacred several Soviet reserve units. The sight filled the colonel general with confidence:

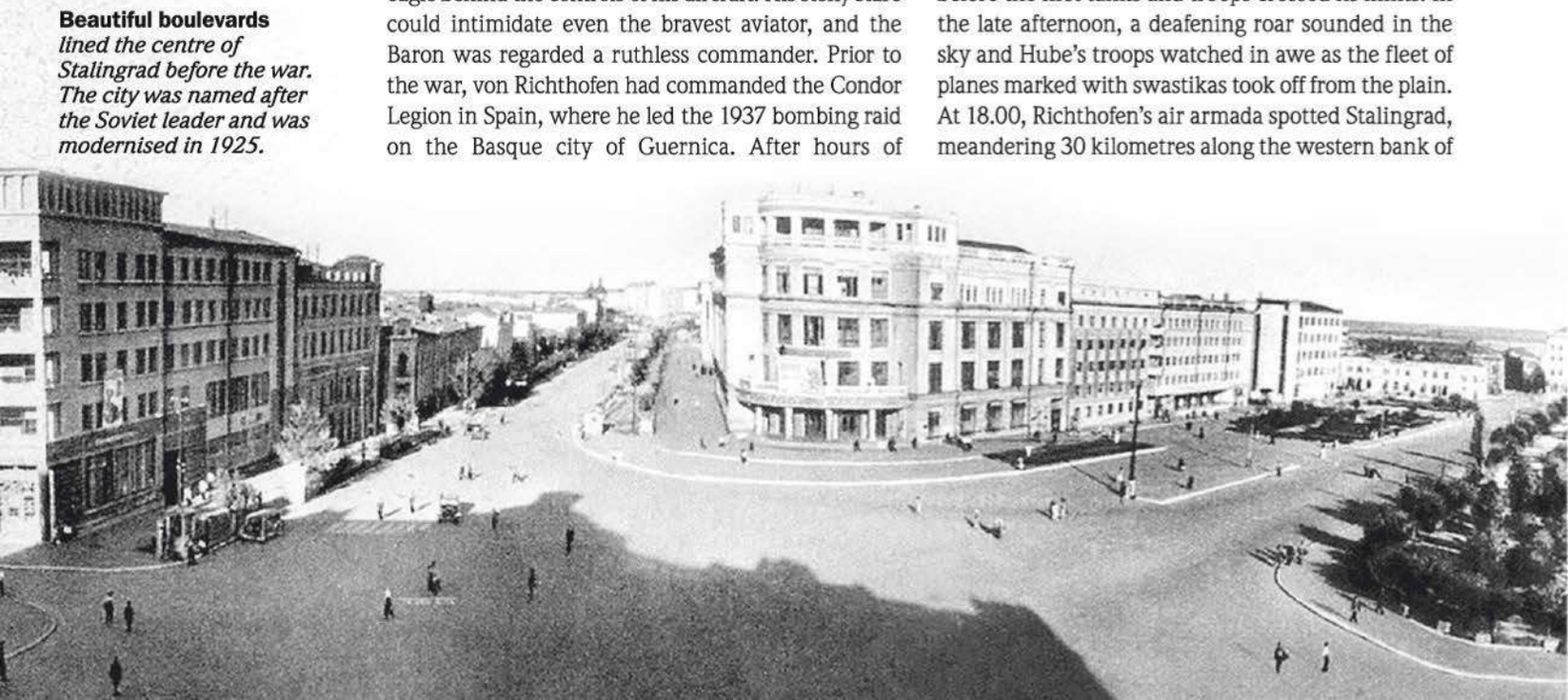
"Enemy much weaker than I expected… Put the whole of Air Fleet Four in the air, with the result that we simply paralysed the Russians," he wrote.

Richthofen was a cousin of the famous Red Baron and had also fought as a pilot during World War I, although he'd come nowhere near the fighter ace's 80 kills. Following the war's conclusion, the younger Richthofen – also a baron – had risen through the ranks of the German air force. Shortly before *Fall Blau* (Operation Blue), he'd assumed command of *Luftflotte 4* (Air Fleet Four) – the German air fleet on the South-east Front. Aged just 46, Richthofen already looked like an older man, but remained as fast and alert as a sea eagle behind the controls of his aircraft. His stony stare could intimidate even the bravest aviator, and the Baron was regarded a ruthless commander. Prior to the war, von Richthofen had commanded the Condor Legion in Spain, where he led the 1937 bombing raid on the Basque city of Guernica. After hours of relentless pounding, the Germans pulverised the small town, killing hundreds of civilians. The attack was a victory for German-backed Spanish nationalists and a demonstration of the Luftwaffe's ability to bomb cities to rubble. By August 1942, Richthofen was ready to turn the same weapons on Stalingrad:

"The battle for Stalingrad, the stronghold of the Reds, has begun. By inflicting devastating blows on the enemy, the Luftwaffe will bring this battle to a successful conclusion. I expect that all Luftwaffe unit commanders, both in the air and on the ground, will give their utmost to carry us towards final victory," wrote the Baron to all units of Luftflotte 4. Following Hitler's orders, the combined air forces on the South-eastern Front were now to concentrate exclusively on Stalingrad *"to cripple the Russians completely"*.

On the morning of 23rd August, Richthofen landed on the plain west of Stalingrad, from where General Hans Hube's panzer forces were advancing on the industrial city. Wearing shirt sleeves with his cap pushed back on his neck so that the sweat could be seen on his bald head, the Baron stepped out into the baking heat and approached Hube:

"Make use of today! You'll be supported by 1,200 aircraft. Tomorrow I can't promise you any more," said Richthofen, who couldn't hide his pride at deploying so many planes to attack Stalingrad. With that strength, the Germans could crush the city before the first tanks and troops crossed its limits. In the late afternoon, a deafening roar sounded in the sky and Hube's troops watched in awe as the fleet of planes marked with swastikas took off from the plain. At 18.00, Richthofen's air armada spotted Stalingrad, meandering 30 kilometres along the western bank of



Beautiful boulevards *lined the centre of Stalingrad before the war. The city was named after the Soviet leader and was modernised in 1925.*

the Volga. A few minutes later, death rained down on the city.

Sirens wailed in Stalingrad

23rd August was an ordinary Sunday in war-torn Stalingrad. Its citizens had worked all day to feed the insatiable Soviet war machine. Few of the city's populace could remember the last time they'd had a weekend off. By 18.00, as the working day came to an end, the streets in the market district were busy, as observed by soldier Nikolai Razuvayev:

"I remember that the market was still buzzing with people, and children were bustling around the Prizyv cinema… All of a sudden, a voice boomed out of a loud-speaker: 'Attention, citizens – air-raid warning!' The people thronging the market and walking along the streets looked up anxiously, but didn't particularly hurry to get to the shelters, as they were already used to such alarms."

The sirens blared all over the city. Within minutes, an ominous roar sounded, and soon shells from anti-aircraft guns thundered into the sky. It soon became clear that this day's attack would go down in history:

"There had never been an air raid like that before. It actually looked like the sky was covered with airplanes… Factory number 687, a solid-tyre factory, was the first place to catch fire. It had just been rebuilt but hadn't started production yet," recalled local party secretary Claudia Denisova, who had found herself in the middle of the bombardment.

Nikolai Razuvayev witnessed first-hand how the Germans' bombs enveloped Stalingrad in all-encompassing darkness: *"After ten minutes the sun was blocked out; everything was covered in smoke and dust. The ground beneath my feet was shaking. There was a continuous roaring on all sides, and fragments of bombs and broken stone were falling from the sky."*

Richthofen's air force included the Heinkel He 111 and Junkers Ju 88 medium bombers, accompanied by the small Junkers 87 "Stuka" dive-bombers. With its built-in sirens, the Stuka's howling dive was enough to terrify anyone who heard the sound from the ground. Wave after wave of bombs blanketed Stalingrad.

"They bombed us mercilessly, and there was fire all around. It was like this: one of them flies in, bombs a street, and then the next one's right behind. This goes on and on like a conveyor belt, and all the while with the wailing sirens," explained Claudia Denisova, who at one point found herself in a building that was hit: *"It was terrifying. The shock wave knocked me through the building and pinned me to a wall, and I was covered in white plaster. One wall of the building was missing. Thankfully, no one was hurt."*

Teenager Larisa Ladnaya was also terrified when the German bombs reached her neighbourhood, ▸

THE REASONS WHY...

…Soviet pilots were poorly trained

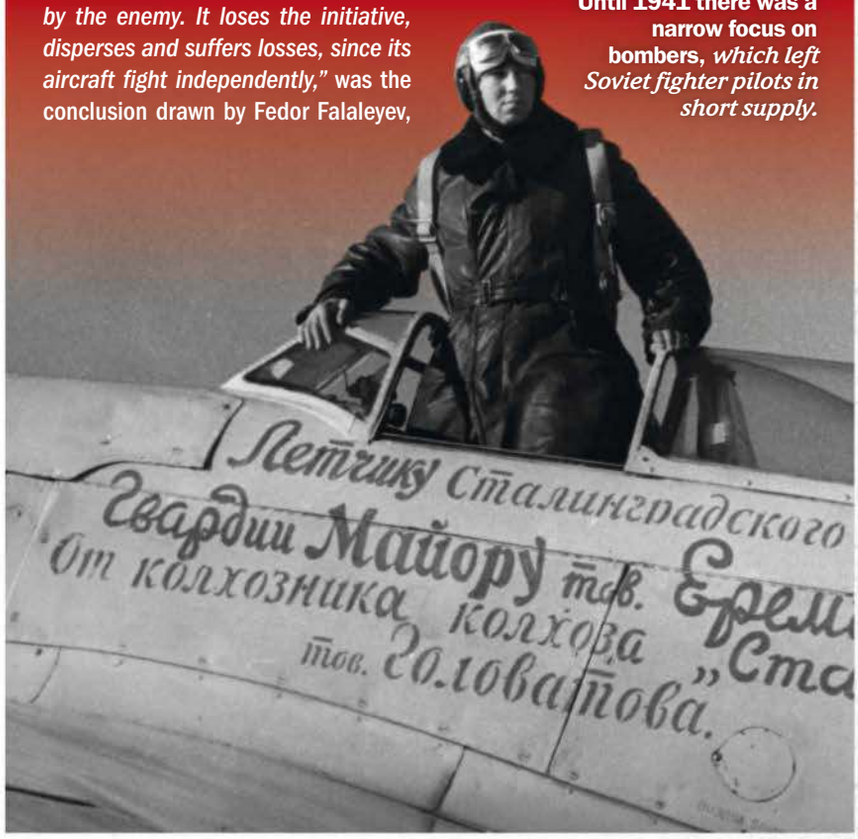
When the air attack on Stalingrad began, Soviet pilots offered no significant resistance. Poor training and lack of experience meant the pilots were no match for their enemy.

The ordinary Soviet pilot was anything but a killing machine behind the controls. Training was short and in many cases pilots had extremely poor knowledge of their aircraft. When the 220th Fighter Air Division arrived at Stalingrad, two-thirds of the pilots had only minimal experience flying the newly developed Yak-1 fighters that they were to use in the coming battle against the enemy.

On top of this, pilots had never been in combat before and were easily spooked. This was particularly evident when the Soviets flew in formation and the Germans hit their only experienced pilot – the one usually flying at the front.

"A small group is easily contained by the enemy. It loses the initiative, disperses and suffers losses, since its aircraft fight independently," was the conclusion drawn by Fedor Falaleyev, the Air Force commander on the South-west Front, in 1942.

Soviet pilots also didn't gain a thorough understanding of the region's geography, so even where they should have had a natural advantage, the pilots fell short. Knowledge of German aircraft types and their tactics was similarly poor until the Air Force's supreme commander, Alexander Novikov, set out to do something about the problem. In the summer of 1942, he set up an intelligence unit to uncover the Germans' secrets so that Red Army pilots could gain knowledge about what they were up against in the skies.



Until 1941 there was a narrow focus on bombers, ***which left Soviet fighter pilots in short supply.***

Gentlemen, flying for fun and seeing who can shoot down the most enemy machines must stop. ■ **Wolf-Dietrich Wilcke on German pride.**



The German SC250 bomb fitted most bombers.

The SC250 penetrated walls, before the explosive detonated.

where she lived with her heavily pregnant mother and two younger siblings:

"My mother went into labour when the bombs started falling. A new baby brother was born. We all went to shelter in a railway tunnel. There must have been about 30 people in there. But they started to bomb the railway line, and shrapnel flew into the tunnel. Many people were killed in that tunnel in the first days. My mother was wounded in the chest while she was feeding the baby. My mother was bleeding and the baby was crying… In the morning we buried the dead."

From early evening onwards, Richthofen's crews dropped more than 1,000 tonnes of bombs on Stalingrad, setting the city alight from one end to the other. Up to 40,000 civilians lost their lives in the attacks that night, leading to 23rd August 1942 being dubbed "Black Sunday".

The German Stuka pilots, flying back west while the summer sun still shone, let their sirens wail in salute to Hube's panzer troops on the plain. The thick columns of smoke in the distance behind them left no doubt as to the mission's success.

The Germans dominated the sky

On the morning of 23rd August, Richthofen had warned Panzer General Hube that he could not promise more planes the next day, but the baron still had plenty of machinery for the next raids.

From a total of 1,600 sorties during the first day of Stalingrad's bombing, the Germans lost only three aircraft. These tiny losses underlined the Luftwaffe's total dominance at the start of the air campaign.

At the same time, the figures were an eye-opener for the stunned Soviets: *"No one will ever forget that day – it was a living nightmare. We had been through a lot in the war up to that time, but what we saw on 23rd August was something completely different,"* noted General Andrei Yeremenko, Stalingrad's Soviet commander. The next day, he was pleased to see the Soviets put more planes in the air.

"Now the Russian command had seen what was happening. The Soviets put all their available planes into battle," said German pilot Heinrich von Einsiedel. In his Messerschmitt Bf 109 fighter, Einsiedel was one of many fighter pilots who escorted the German bombers that swooped over Stalingrad on 24th August. Now Soviet fighters were constantly appearing in the sky, but their resistance exposed another Soviet weakness: their planes were no match for the Luftwaffe. True, the Soviet Air Force had some modern and competitive Yak-1 fighters, but most Soviet planes were either the underpowered (and overweight) LaGG-3 fighter or the ageing Polikarpov I-16, dubbed *rata* (Spanish for rat) by the German pilots after its appearance in the Spanish Civil War. Outmanoeuvring and shooting down these obsolete machines was child's play for the Bf 109:

"Every German Stuka, every combat aeroplane, was surrounded by clusters of Russian fighters," Einsiedel recounted of his first sortie the day after Black Sunday. *"We threw ourselves into the tumult at random. A two-star Rata crossed my track. The Russian saw me, went into a nose dive and tried to get away by flying low. Fear seemed to have crippled him. He raced ten feet above ground on a straight course and did not defend himself. My machine vibrated with the recoil of its guns. A streak of flame shot from the petrol tank of the Russian plane. It exploded and rolled over on the ground. A broad, long strip of scorched steppe-land was all that it left behind."*

Not only were the Germans' machines more robust, their pilots were also far more experienced than their opponents, who often panicked when the Germans quickly shot down the most advanced aircraft in the Soviets' six-man formation.

"We flew in formations of up to five planes and each had three machine guns. We had agreed on the tactic of firing at the first Russian plane that



The bombing raid was so intense *on 23rd August 1942 that columns of smoke 3.5 kilometres high rose above Stalingrad. The city burned for two months afterwards.*

approached us and mostly we managed to shoot it down or damage it badly so that it turned away. When that happened, the other five Russians turned away as well," reported bomber pilot Detlef Radbruch.

Nor was the experienced and illustrious fighter pilot Johannes "Macky" Steinhoff impressed by the enemy's actions in the air: *"In fighting the Soviets, we fought an apparatus, not a human being. There was no flexibility in their tactical orientation, no individual freedom of action, and in that way they were a little stupid. If we shot down the leader in a Soviet fighter group, the rest were simply sitting ducks, waiting to be taken out."*

German superiority came at a high cost to civilians in Stalingrad. Day after day, its citizens endured ▸

The bombardment of Stalingrad is relentless. By the end of 1942, the Luftwaffe has dropped a million bombs on the city, along with propaganda leaflets and shrapnel.

23/8 **Within 24 hours, the Luftwaffe drops 1,000 tonnes of bombs on the city, which is mainly made up of wooden buildings. The houses are engulfed in a sea of flames on this "Black Sunday".**

General Novikov's stroke of genius *was that the Soviet Air Force should not counter-attack in the air, but instead assemble aircraft to protect Stalingrad.*



new horrors as death flew in over the city. The endless bombardment left them no moment of peace.

"Aircraft roar all night over our heads. The sky is humming day and night, as if we were sitting under the span of a huge bridge... People are in basements. Everything is burned out... Trams and cars with no glass in their windows... The light pink sky is looking through thousands and thousands of empty windows and roofs," noted Soviet front-line reporter Vasily Grossman.

On the opposite side, Richthofen was delighted. Flying over Stalingrad in his Fieseler Storch on 25th August, the air commander saw with great satisfaction how his beloved air force had *"destroyed"* the Soviet city.

Best line of defence was in the air

After three days of intense bombing, Stalingrad had been transformed into a smoking ruin, with virtually no building left untouched. But Richthofen and his pilots continued to bomb the city. The Germans didn't just want to put the factories out of business; they also wanted to destroy the buildings. The continuing missions were also about destroying enemy supply lines, including traffic on the Volga River, where ships and barges carried ammunition and supplies to the city's defences. If the German Army was to take Stalingrad, the lifeline across the Volga must be cut. This task would become regular work for Luftwaffe pilots throughout the rest of the battle.

Although the city was in flames, all targets were difficult, be it a factory, a defensive position or a river barge, because the Soviet soldiers manning the anti-aircraft positions in Stalingrad fought doggedly to make life difficult for the Luftwaffe. As a result, German pilots found themselves in mortal danger every time they had to *"push the bombs into the target like loaves of bread into an oven"*, as Stuka pilot Paul-Werner Hozzel put it. His compatriot Horst Ramstetter dreaded every mission where he had to pass Soviet air defences:

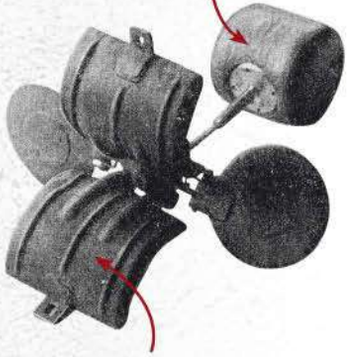
"Undoubtedly the most difficult mission was Stalingrad, because the concentration of defences was so enormous, more than at any [other] time [in] the Russian campaign. For me at any rate, it was an enormous effort to reach the various points that had been chosen as targets there, fly there and do the job... The Russians had set up their flak, and before you got to Stalingrad, you saw what looked like a wall of fire. Shells detonated, it looked like darker and lighter balls of cotton wool. And we had to fly into them! There wasn't time to be afraid because we were so preoccupied with keeping our planes in the air, but when I returned to base I felt I had just been dragged across an obstacle course. We didn't have much respite, though. We were soon in the air again."

Even the swift fighters were suffering from the increasingly heavy fire the Soviets had placed on the Volga's east bank. On 16th September, Sergeant Jürgen Kalb was forced to eject from his downed Bf 109 and parachute into the Volga. He quickly pulled himself out of the harness before swimming to shore. Here, Red Army soldiers awaited him.

The thousands of sorties over Stalingrad meant that many Luftwaffe pilots had to fly until they died. In September, one pilot calculated that over the past three months he had flown 228 missions – the same number he had previously flown over *"Poland, France, England, Yugoslavia and Russia combined"* from September 1939 to the summer of 1942. Bomber crews on the Stalingrad front were often in the air six hours a day. When they landed at the improvised airfields on the steppes, there was no time for anything other than a bite to eat in the field kitchen and the receipt of new plans before the aircraft had to go again. Luftwaffe personnel worked around the clock on the ground too. Mechanics fitted new parts, radio technicians checked the comms system, and the weapons men checked that the machine guns and rifles were working before loading new bombs on to the waiting machines.

In the early autumn, the German troops felt that their hard work was paying off. They had the undisputed

The explosive charge of a German butterfly bomb fired splinters in all directions.



The name came from the wings that unfolded when the bomb was dropped.



25/9 The Luftwaffe flies 950 missions a day from 5th-25th September, defeating any Soviet counter-attack on the ground.

5/10 900 aircraft – mainly Stuka bombers – attack the tractor factory and wipe out entire Soviet regiments, including the 339th Rifle Regiment.

14/10 The Luftwaffe drops 600 tonnes of bombs over the city and Volga's west bank, but fail to crush resistance.

upper hand. But Heinrich Einsiedel's commander, Wolf-Dietrich Wilcke, nicknamed "the Prince" by the Messerschmitt pilots, tried to remind his pilots to keep their heads.

"Gentlemen, flying for fun and seeing who can shoot down the most enemy machines must stop. Every machine, every drop of fuel, every hour's flying is irreplaceable," Wilcke warned.

In the midst of the early triumphant mood, the squadron leader saw what many other German pilots were only just starting to see. The Soviet air force had not been broken, and increasing numbers of planes with red stars were appearing in the sky.

Air chief copied German success

Since the Germans had resumed their rapid advance into the Soviet Union at the beginning of the summer, Soviet air capabilities had generally remained below par. Not only were its aircraft and pilots of poor quality, but Soviet Air Force strategies were no match for those of the enemy. As early as June 1942, General Fedor Falaleyev had identified where key problems lay.

"Our attack aircraft and bombers do not always make enemy tanks their priority targets, preferring instead to attack lorries, carts and other less important targets. Flight briefing is poor. Mission objectives are not clear or specific... Unit commanders do not bear proper responsibility for fulfilling combat missions. Causes of losses are not analysed or determined," Falaleyev argued.

To combat these issues, Stalin appointed Colonel General Alexander Novikov as the new commander of the Red Army Air Force. The appointment proved to be one of the Soviet leader's most astute ▸▸

German air strategy tore the enemy apart

Early success in the German air war was largely due to the pilots' innovative formation flying, with planes following each other in pairs. This simple trick easily outmanoeuvred the Soviets' traditional V-formation.

By chance, German pilots discovered that their superior aircraft could wipe out the enemy if pilots maintained formations of two pairs, staggered in altitude and distance, but within sight of each other. A pair was called a *rotte* (section), and a group of four a *schwarm* (flight). Each section had a leader who oriented forward while the pair's wingman guarded the rear. The strategy required the pilots to position themselves so that anyone could detect an enemy approaching under cover of the sun's glare. Because vision was the only sense pilots had to orient themselves with, coordinating attacks was easier with just two planes.

Soviet air chief Alexander Novikov was not above learning from the enemy. He closely examined German fighter pilot strategy and introduced the new formation under the name *para-zveno* (section-flight). In addition, the more experienced Soviet fighter pilots were assigned to carry out "zasada" attacks, ambushes in which pilots laid in wait in the sky for an opportunity to attack German heavy bombers or reconnaissance aircraft from behind.

The RAF named the technique the "finger four" formation after the different lengths of fingers on an outstretched hand.



Stuka bombers flew in a staggered formation *to improve the schwarm's pilots visibility and increase their odds of spotting the enemy early.*

> Shells detonated, it looked like darker and lighter balls of cotton wool. And we had to fly into them! ■ Pilot Horst Ramstetter on Soviet anti-aircraft guns.

Luftwaffe carpet-bombed factories and ferries



Hitler and his generals intended to eliminate Stalingrad as an industrial city and transport hub. Consequently, when the bombardment began in late August, the Luftwaffe's primary targets were key strategic, administrative and economic points. Pilots targeted industrial districts, including the huge tractor factory, which despite its name produced mainly tanks, and the Red October steelworks, which produced a tenth of the Soviet Union's steel in the summer of 1942. Before the attack, German intelligence services produced maps pinpointing the sprawling factory districts and marking their weak points. The bombardment on 23rd August hit the city's industrial areas hard. Communication channels in the city were also smashed, and the following day explosions cut off the water supply to large parts of Stalingrad, leaving the city's firefighters unable to tackle the raging fires.

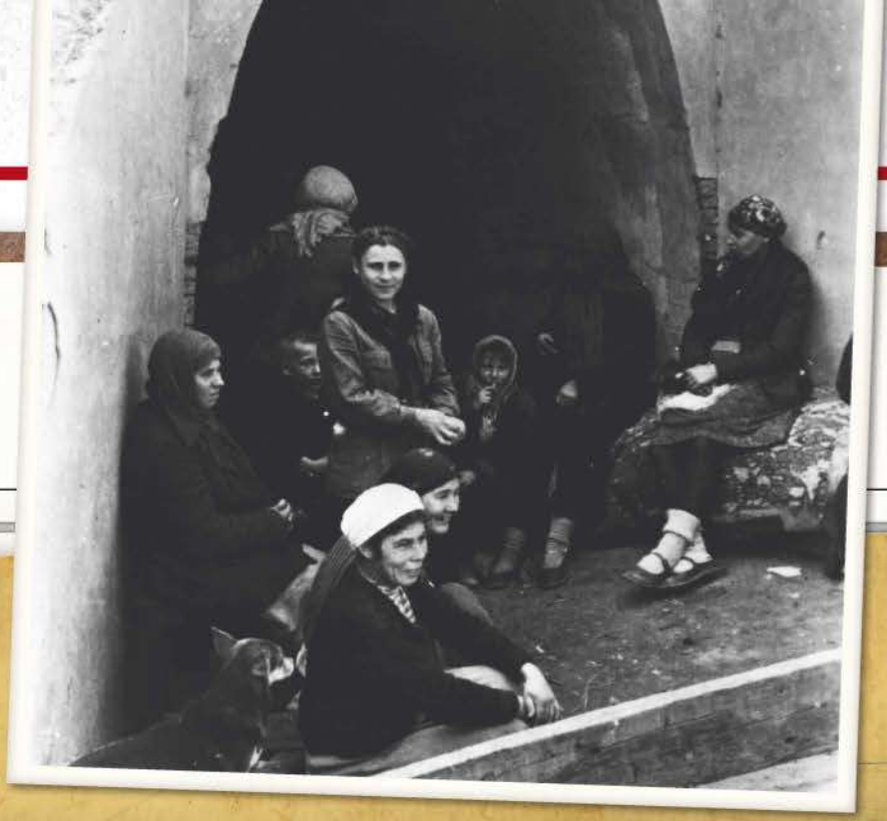
During the vast majority of German bombing raids, pilots were also tasked with attacking shipping on the Volga, which transferred supplies and equipment from the eastern bank of the river to Stalingrad on the western side. At the same time, pilots also targeted Soviet defensive positions in the city.

1 **The factories** were the German bombers' main target, but although many were attacked from August onwards, they continued production, albeit at reduced levels. The Barrikady factory, which produced anti-tank guns, and the Red October steel factory continued to operate until October.

2 **The oil refinery** was so badly hit on 23rd August that a fireball 500 metres high rose from the plant. In the days that followed, the black column of smoke could be seen over 300 km away. Stalingrad's defence chief, General Yeremenko, witnessed burning oil flowing in streams down towards the Volga to set barges and boats on fire, as roads melted in a "whirl of heat and smoke".

A thick blanket of flak *from Soviet anti-aircraft guns was Stalingrad's only answer to the air attacks.*





The city's sewers became home *to the citizens of Stalingrad as the Germans began their bombardment.*

Workers' housing

Gun factory

Steelworks

Soviet guns

Oil refinery

Mamayev Kurgan

Industrial area

Urban area on the east bank

5 **The Luftwaffe** tried to take out the guns on the east bank of the Volga, which the Soviets were firing at the Germans.

4 **Residential areas** with civilians did not escape Luftwaffe bombs. As early as 23rd August, housing complexes burned to the ground and German bombs reduced the vast poorer neighbourhoods, where houses were built from wood, to ashes.

3 **Traffic on the Volga** was subjected to intense German bombardment throughout the Battle of Stalingrad, as barges and ships ferried munitions and supplies across the river. Unfortunately, many vessels carrying civilians in the opposite direction were also hit.



General Wolfram von Richthofen *left cities including Guernica, Warsaw, Sevastopol and Stalingrad bombed in his wake.*

decisions. Even as the Germans launched their first air raids in the summer of 1942, the 41-year-old Novikov was busy reforming the air force so that by late autumn his pilots would be far better able to tackle the superior enemy in the skies.

Novikov ordered that the uncoordinated attacks must stop and reconnaissance of enemy positions must be more thorough before bombers were deployed. The general directed the operation in close cooperation with Moscow and established a new efficient communication network between the Red Army and its pilots. Experts were sent to the front, where they set up radio systems and trained the army in their use, so that foot soldiers could make radio contact with the planes. Almost overnight, communication became lightning fast, allowing Soviet fighter pilots to promptly receive new briefings, attack orders or intelligence on where enemy tanks or aircraft were mobilising.

After Novikov's reorganisation, Soviet bombing raids were increasingly carried out at night, making it more difficult for enemy fighters. Air force pilots were trained in night flying, and a new formation, heavily inspired by the Luftwaffe, was also included in pilot training. Myriads of aircraft were rolling out of the factories, but production alone couldn't sustain the Soviet Air Force. The Red Army had a rapidly growing need for new pilots. So Novikov cut the training period from years to months.

On the other hand, pilots become noticeably more proficient after Novikov's reforms, and many of them ended up receiving the Order of the Red Banner for their bravery in the air. Luftwaffe pilots noticed the change during the war:

"The Soviet pilots did get better over time. In fact, the famous Red Banner units had some of the best pilots in the world," said Johannes Steinhoff, who was on the Eastern Front from 1941.

Gulf between air forces closed

Luftwaffe pilots continued to shoot down hundreds of Soviet aircraft, but the Germans could no longer ignore their own casualties. Not least because the Soviet formations often hid a fanatical Communist who, even in hopelessly outnumbered situations, attacked without regard for their own survival. The most self-sacrificing Soviet pilots were willing to deliberately blow up German aircraft. On 14th September, when young Soviet Yak-1 pilot I M Chumbarev spotted a ▸

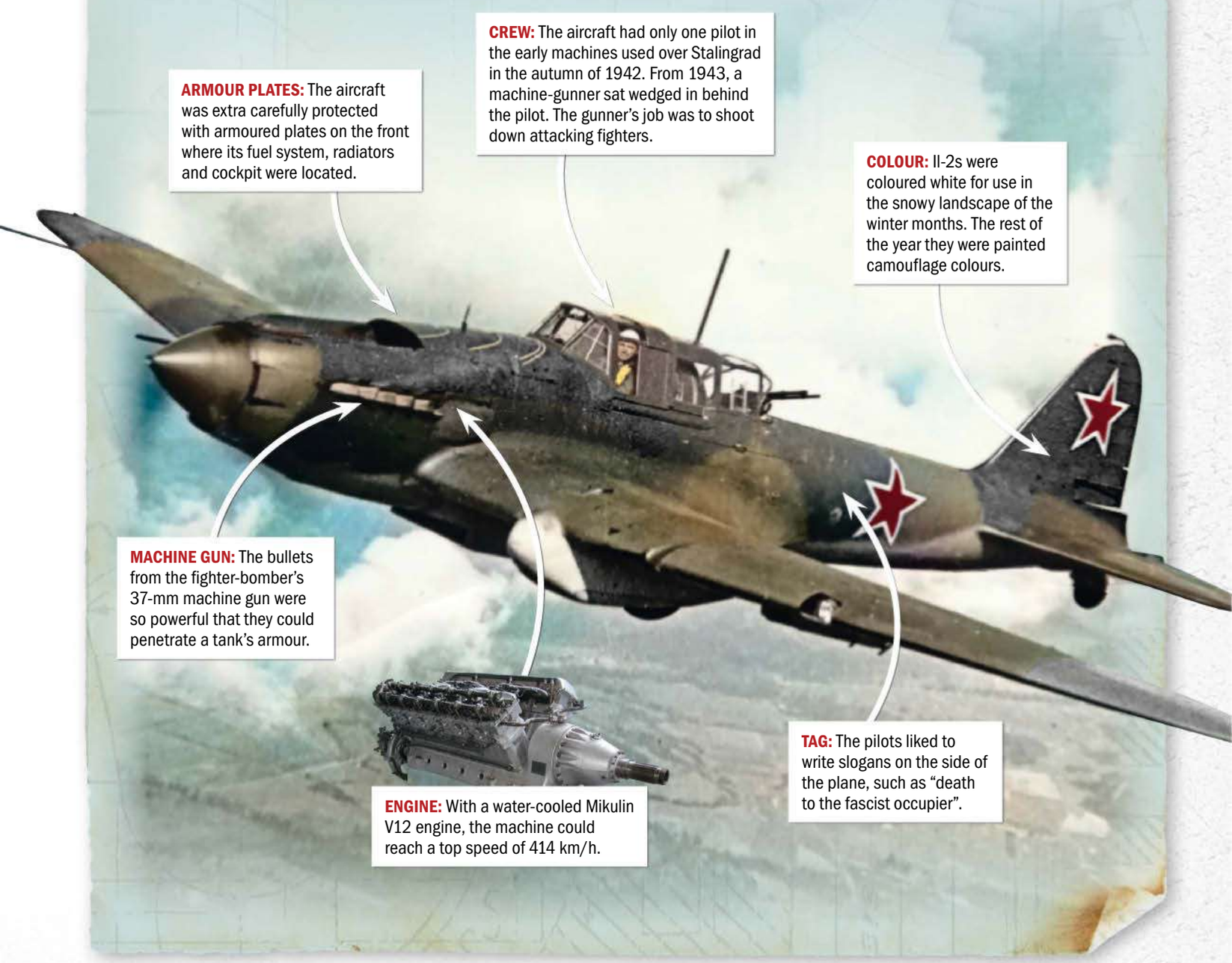
Armoured bomber became pilots' favourite

The Soviet Air Force loved its new Il-2 plane because a layer of armour plating protected the pilots far better than other Soviet aircraft. With the fighter-bomber on the wing, the Red Army had a trump card on the Eastern Front.

The Soviet Air Force's favourite aircraft, the Ilyushin Il-2 Shturmovik, went by many names. Its designer called it a "flying tank", the ground troops "hunchback", and the pilots "*Ilyusha*" – "little Ilyushin" – after its designer, Sergey Ilyushin. German troops, on the other hand, who found the IL-2 hard to shoot down, dubbed it the "concrete bomber". Soviet pilots adored the aircraft, which went into production in 1941.

"It was an excellent aircraft for those times! Carried 600 kilograms of bombs, eight rockets, 300 23-mm shells and 1,800 rounds for each machine gun," enthused pilot Yuri Khukhrikov.

A hybrid between a fighter and a heavily armed bomber, the Shturmovik was designed to attack ground targets such as tanks, freight trains and airfields. The Il-2 could also hunt German transport aircraft and heavy bombers. Stalin equated the production of the Il-2 with the production of grain as the planes flowed off the conveyor belts. Around 35,000 were produced by 1945 – more than any other fighter aircraft during the war.



ARMOUR PLATES: The aircraft was extra carefully protected with armoured plates on the front where its fuel system, radiators and cockpit were located.

CREW: The aircraft had only one pilot in the early machines used over Stalingrad in the autumn of 1942. From 1943, a machine-gunner sat wedged in behind the pilot. The gunner's job was to shoot down attacking fighters.

COLOUR: Il-2s were coloured white for use in the snowy landscape of the winter months. The rest of the year they were painted camouflage colours.

MACHINE GUN: The bullets from the fighter-bomber's 37-mm machine gun were so powerful that they could penetrate a tank's armour.

ENGINE: With a water-cooled Mikulin V12 engine, the machine could reach a top speed of 414 km/h.

TAG: The pilots liked to write slogans on the side of the plane, such as "death to the fascist occupier".

The real thing was very different. They came back crying their eyes out. They were ready to drop. ■ **Pilot Horst Ramstetter explained how Stalingrad shattered morale.**

reconnaissance plane, he flew his own nose directly into the rear of the enemy at an altitude of 1,000 metres. The German aircraft crashed to the ground, while Chumbarev, impressively retained control of his fighter, which he landed safely in his own territory.

A downed Luftwaffe plane wasn't replaced, while Soviet factories churned out ever-increasing numbers of aircraft. Production of one new model was ramped up in particular: the rugged Ilyushin Il-2 Shturmovik fighter-bomber, known as the flying tank.

"Our Red Army now needs Il-2 aircraft like the air it breathes, like the bread it eats... I ask you not to try the government's patience, and demand that you manufacture more Ils. This is my final warning," Stalin threatened one aircraft factory, which was failing to meet the Soviet leader's strict demands. Unsurprisingly, production increased.

In September, Stalin also ordered all air forces be deployed to help Stalingrad, and a whole new air army was sent to the South-eastern Front. The Soviets now had 738 aircraft, and by late autumn the balance of power in the skies tipped as they suddenly had more aircraft in the air than the Germans. Luftwaffe supremacy crumbled – Heinrich Einsiedel found it hard to comprehend what was happening – not least because his respect for the enemy pilots remained lacking.

"How they managed this in view of such losses was a mystery to me, and even a greater mystery when one saw the captured Soviet pilots who, as a rule, had such dull and primitive faces," Einsiedel wrote. The same frustration gradually set in with the Luftwaffe's regional commander-in-chief, the formerly brash Wolfram von Richthofen.

"We have not been able to master the Russian fighters absolutely and, of course, the Russians can attack our forward airfields any time they like," he conceded.

Not only were the Soviets attacking more and more German aircraft on the ground at the makeshift airstrips built by the Luftwaffe on parched fields, they were also targeting established airfields captured by the Germans with increasing success. One September evening, Lieutenant Anatoly Kojevnikov attacked a facility near the town of Rossosh, where several Heinkel He 111 bombers had been rolled out for an evening sortie.

"Our machine guns razed the airfield, as bombs from our Shturmovik sent fountains of earth into the air and destroyed enemy aircraft. Burning aviation fuel scattered on the ground, and a black cloud of smoke billowed up from a fuel tank to obscure the horizon. Enemy anti-aircraft guns stood no chance and were wiped out early in the attack. As our fighters strafed the airfield, we failed to spot eight Messerschmitters arriving. But just as Lieutenant Kudinov rose from a dive, he saw a plane with a cross and swastika underneath. Instinctively he pressed the fire button and saw flashes of fire ... after which the enemy plane crashed to the ground," Kojevnikov recalled. The Germans had to admit that they had lost precious



Soviets flew into German planes *to force them down. Here, a sergeant survived the deliberate ramming.*

aircraft, while the Soviet lieutenant's unit flew away from the successful raid with no casualties. The victory was a small harbinger that the tide was turning.

Germans lost their momentum

Although the Soviets enjoyed success as early as September 1942, it was not until late autumn that the Germans begin to really feel the effects of air resistance. Not only did the enemy have more planes in the skies, they were also displaying more boldness and intelligence. Little by little, fear crept into the Luftwaffe pilots' minds.

"It's a terrible moment when you see six planes flying towards you at the same time. It was terrifying. We didn't know what was going to happen," recalled Detlef Radbruch.

Newly arrived young German pilots were in for a shock when they found out that the skies on the Eastern Front were no longer a glorious place to be.

"When our advance on Stalingrad began, everyone said, great, we're moving, marching, everything's fine. Then they realised too late that the Russians had no intention of losing," wrote Horst Ramstetter. *" Some of the pilots were only 18 and had never flown a mission. They'd had their heads filled with 'Führer, Volk and Vaterland — we'll storm onwards, we heroes will win the war!' But the real thing was very different. They came back crying their eyes out."*

Ramstetter himself experienced how death waited behind every cloud during a fighter mission behind enemy lines: *"I was flying an FW 190, and discovered a Russian train loaded with war materiel,"* he recalled. *"We attacked and destroyed the engine, but my aircraft received a massive hit and I had to make an emergency landing. I came down behind the Russian lines... I got out of the plane, saw a cornfield and ran into it. I heard the troops rolling past somewhere in the distance and I said to myself: 'If the Russians should come now, you've got seven or eight rounds in your gun. You can try to get the Ivans with seven of them and the last one you've got left will be for yourself.' But I thought again and said: 'Nothing doing! I'm not going to kill myself.' I had my compass with me and knew in which direction I had to go. I set off, always keeping myself hidden. On the second night I arrived at a German border position on the front line. I swam across a river and ran across a field and shouted, 'Don't shoot! I'm a German pilot!' But just as I reached the position safely, a Russian fighter-bomber appeared and dived down on us. Everyone threw themselves to the ground and some men jumped on top of me. They saved my life. They were hit by shrapnel, but I survived."*





Some German incendiary bombs had a charge in the nose that could punch a hole in a house before the bomb went off.

A single bomber could drop 1,152 incendiary bombs at once. Each bomb weighed one kilogram.

The growing German catastrophe at Stalingrad accelerated when the Luftwaffe was forced to move air units to the Mediterranean, where fighting had also flared up. At the same time, aircraft production could not keep up with or match that of the Soviets. Combined with increasing numbers of lost aircraft, the situation naturally started to get to the pilots, as Petty Officer R Holzer reported after being captured:

"The morale of flight personnel in my unit, which had been high at the time of our arrival at the front, was considerably undermined by the strikes. First and foremost, most of the flight crews were left without aircraft. Secondly, everyone realised that war in Russia was anything but a walkover, and that both ground and air units were suffering losses."

The Luftwaffe's initial successes left Stalingrad shattered. But rather than pave the way for German victory, the pilots had created a hellish landscape in which their countrymen must now fight. The nightmare had only just begun – for both sides. ■

AT THE SAME TIME

FRANCE/DIEPPE:
- An Allied landing ends in disaster.

POLAND/STANISLAU:
- German soldiers brutalise and execute 1,000 Jews.

USSR/MOSCOW:
- Churchill tells Stalin that D-Day will not be carried out in 1942, as the Soviets hoped.



The Soviets swarmed *out of every corner of Stalingrad like rats, according to the German troops. It was the only way to fight in the shattered city.*



> Can we really have lost so many men? God damn this Stalingrad.
>
> Soldier Wilhelm Hoffman on the sight of German crosses in the city.

RAT WAR IN THE RUINS

Rat war in the ruins

As German troops stormed Stalingrad on 13th September, it soon became clear that the operation would be more difficult than expected. Among the city's fortifications of rubble and twisted steel, the Soviets fiercely defended every metre of ground. The soldiers called the bitter hand-to-hand fighting rat warfare.

By Troels Ussing

German panzer troops, confident of victory, were advancing towards Stalingrad in early September 1942. The industrial city had already been transformed into a smoking ruin. When General Friedrich Paulus and his 6th Army encircled the Soviet 62nd Army on 10th September, the odds were emphatically in Germany's favour. Only 20,000 Soviet troops remained in the city on the west bank of the Volga. They had fewer than 60 tanks, which were stuck in their positions because the rubble prevented the machines from moving.

Two days later, Hitler sent for Paulus, and the Führer was overjoyed when his loyal general showed up at Werwolf headquarters in Ukraine bearing good news. Paulus stood ready with 170,000 men on the front line, and the force was accompanied by 500 tanks and 3,000 big guns and mortars. Since the 6th Army had crossed the Don River on 23rd August, Paulus's troops had stormed forward, destroying 350 guns and 830 tanks, and taking 26,500 Soviet prisoners. The general, eager to please his leader, estimated that Stalingrad could be taken in ten days. With a raised arm and a *"Heil!"* Paulus took leave of Hitler and flew back to the front to make final preparations for the attack on the industrial city. A preliminary bombardment by artillery and aircraft to destroy the Soviet positions was well under way. The shelling continued on 13th September as 6th Army panzer divisions and infantry advanced on the western outskirts of the



city. The men were confident of victory – even those far from the front:

"Here, everyone is awaiting the fall of Stalingrad," read a letter to Paulus from a staff officer on sick leave in Germany, lamenting his inability to take part in the general's impending triumph.

The staff officer, however, was more fortunate than he realised. Stalingrad had been so battered by Luftwaffe attacks that the troops couldn't see where the roads were, and it soon dawned on the generals that they had shot themselves in the foot. Their normally well-oiled blitzkrieg tactics were impossible in the pulverised city. Collapsed buildings and mountains of rubble made any hope of a quick German victory impossible. Instead, bitter hand-to-hand combat awaited in factories, cellars and sewers. Soon, every soldier would want to leave Stalin's city.

Soviets sacrificed themselves

Vasily Chuikov had only just been put in charge of the Soviet 62nd Army when the Germans launched its attack on Stalingrad's suburbs on 13th September. The square-jawed Soviet had promised his superiors at the front, Andrey Yeremenko and Nikita Khrushchev, that he would let his troops die defending the city on the Volga riverbank. The hard-boiled general kept his word, and his men immediately paid the price. Divided into 35-man platoons, they fortified the streets to keep the enemy away from the important waterfront.

"On the 14th, when [the Germans] came into the city, they were getting ready to celebrate. But these detached divisions put them in their place and pushed them back from the riverbank. They'd broken through to the crossing. … We had to at least clear out the landing area. We threw everything at them. The enemy got pushed back to the train station. Everyone stayed in line to the last man," recalled Chuikov of the initial defence, which cost many lives but also ensured that General Alexander Rodimtsev's skilled guardsmen reached the Volga in time.

"We made it so two of Rodimtsev's regiments could make the crossing safely. They entered the battle from the moment they disembarked at the landing. They didn't know where they were or what was happening; they didn't know whether it was night or day. But we had a sense that the enemy was being reckless, that they were coming at us without taking any precautions whatsoever. Our divisions were small, but we kept at it, we kept cutting them down. We still had plenty of ammunition. All the ammo dumps were here. During those three days we took out a huge number of enemy tanks. We lost a lot. They got all our guns and crews, but there was nothing we could have done. Everyone knew we had no right to pull back. … The men knew that they had to fight to the last for Stalingrad. … Everyone knew that those who ran would be shot on the spot. That was more terrifying than the Germans," wrote Chuikov.

Infantryman Wilhelm Hoffman was one of the German soldiers fighting in the area near the Volga bank in the south of Stalingrad. He soon realised ▸



The Soviet spade was designed to dig trenches.

In Stalingrad, the spade's blade was used as a mêlée weapon.

Bomb craters provided the only cover *in Stalingrad's suburbs. Just the chimneys of burnt houses remained after the shelling.*



In a bombed-out grain silo *(left), 50 Soviets stand their ground. After the battle, the building was close to collapse, but continues to remain standing to this day.*

they were up against a savage enemy, ready to sacrifice his life.

"The Russians fight with the desperation of wild beasts; they won't allow themselves be taken prisoner, but instead let you come close and then they throw grenades ... They are fatalists, fanatics," Hoffman wrote in his diary, where he also noted that *"everywhere you look there is fire and flames".*

On 16th September, as part of the German 94th Infantry Division, Hoffman was ordered to attack a cluster of large grain silos south of the waterfront. The Soviets enjoy good views from the top of the eight-storey edifices, and fired machine guns at the enemy through small windows. Hoffman's battalion, however, was supported by tanks, which wove their way over the rubble in the streets to attack the large concrete structures.

"Our battalion is attacking the silo with tanks. Smoke is pouring out of it. The grain is burning and it seems that the Russians inside set fire to it themselves. It's barbaric. The battalion is taking heavy losses. Those are not people in the silo, they are devils and neither fire nor bullets can touch them," Hoffman wrote in despair. One of the diabolical enemies in the silos was marine Andrei Khozyainov. The Soviet had nearly 60 men under his command at the facility and had orders to *"hold it at all costs".*

"We had two Maxim guns, one light machine gun, two anti-tank rifles, three tommy guns and a radio set. ... We were very careful with our ammunition, as it was a long way to bring up more, and a difficult trip. In the silo the grain was on fire, and the water in the machine guns evaporated. The wounded kept asking for something to drink, but there was no water nearby. This was how we defended our position, day and night. Heat, thirst, smoke – everybody's lips were cracked. During the day many of us climbed up to the high points in the silo and from there fired on the Germans, especially at their snipers. At night we came down and made a defensive ring. Our radio set had been put out of action on the first day of battle, so we had no contact with our units."

Khozyainov's men held out for days. They had to urinate on their machine guns to cool them down,

Those are not people in the silo, they are devils and neither fire nor bullets can touch them. ■ Soldier Wilhelm Hoffman on the Soviets' fighting spirit.

but by 20th September, the ammunition boxes were empty.

"Around noon, 12 enemy tanks came up from the south and west. To our dismay, we had already run out of ammunition for our anti-tank rifles, and we also had no grenades left. The tanks approached the silo from two sides and began to fire at our garrison almost at point-blank range. We continued to fire … at the enemy infantry to stop them from entering the silo. … Concrete was raining down on us after each explosion, and the grain was in flames. Even at a metre's distance, we could not see one another for dust and smoke. … On the west side of the silo, the Germans managed in spite of us to enter the building, but we immediately covered the areas they had occupied with gunfire. Fighting raged inside the building. We were so close to the enemy that we could feel and hear their breath, their every movement, but we could not see them. We fired at noises," Khozyainov reported.

By nightfall, the Soviets had run out of ammunition, and Khozyainov decided that the few remaining men had no choice but to flee. The exhausted soldiers found a pocket between the Germans' tanks and troops, and sneaked away in the dark to safety.

"We were faint with thirst. 'Something to drink! Something to drink!' was all we could think. We drank our fill in the darkness," Khozyainov recalled.

The next morning, Wilhelm Hoffman and his compatriots arrived. They were stunned by how many comrades they'd lost in the battle for the silo – especially as enemy casualties were surprisingly few.

"We found about 40 corpses in the silo. About half of them are sailors – sea devils, they are. We took one prisoner. He's badly wounded and can't speak, or pretends he can't. Our battalion is now reduced to less than the ordinary complement of a company. None of our old soldiers can remember fighting as barbarous as this," Hoffman wrote bitterly.

Hilltop bathed in soldiers' blood

While Hoffman and Khozyainov fought at the silo, fighting broke out at every strategic position in the ruins. The 102-metre hill of Mamayev Kurgan, about five kilometres north of the city centre, was a particular focus. The group holding the hill had a view of the city and the Volga, where barges carried soldiers and supplies to Chuikov's beleaguered troops.

"From this dominating height one could control almost the whole city and the shipping on the Volga. It had been ploughed over by bombs and shells and richly soaked in blood," was the description of German soldier Josef Goblirsch, who participated in several attacks on Mamayev Kurgan in September.

Goblirsch's regiment suffered *"heavy losses"* to Soviet fire but advanced only a few metres. When the Germans captured parts of the hill, the Soviets gave them no quarter. Chuikov sacrificed his men without blinking, as they savagely attacked to prevent the Germans from setting up artillery. Company commander Nikolai Maznitsa of the 95th Rifle Division was among those who had to charge up Mamayev Kurgan with only shell holes for protection.

"The hill would come alive again like a volcano and we would crawl out of the shell holes and put our machine guns to work. The barrels of the guns were red-hot and the water boiled inside them. … The slopes of the Kurgan were completely covered in corpses. In some places you had to move two or three dead bodies aside to lie down. They quickly began to decompose and the stench was appalling, but you just had to lie down and pay no attention. … Sometimes it seemed that like we were all condemned to death," said the commander, who almost paid the ultimate price on 23rd September:

"I was buried in my foxhole during an attack and was unconscious under the earth for several hours. When they dug me out, they took my documents away as evidence of my death, and they were about to bury me … when a bomb blast threw me several metres and somehow brought me round. … I retook command of my company that same day."

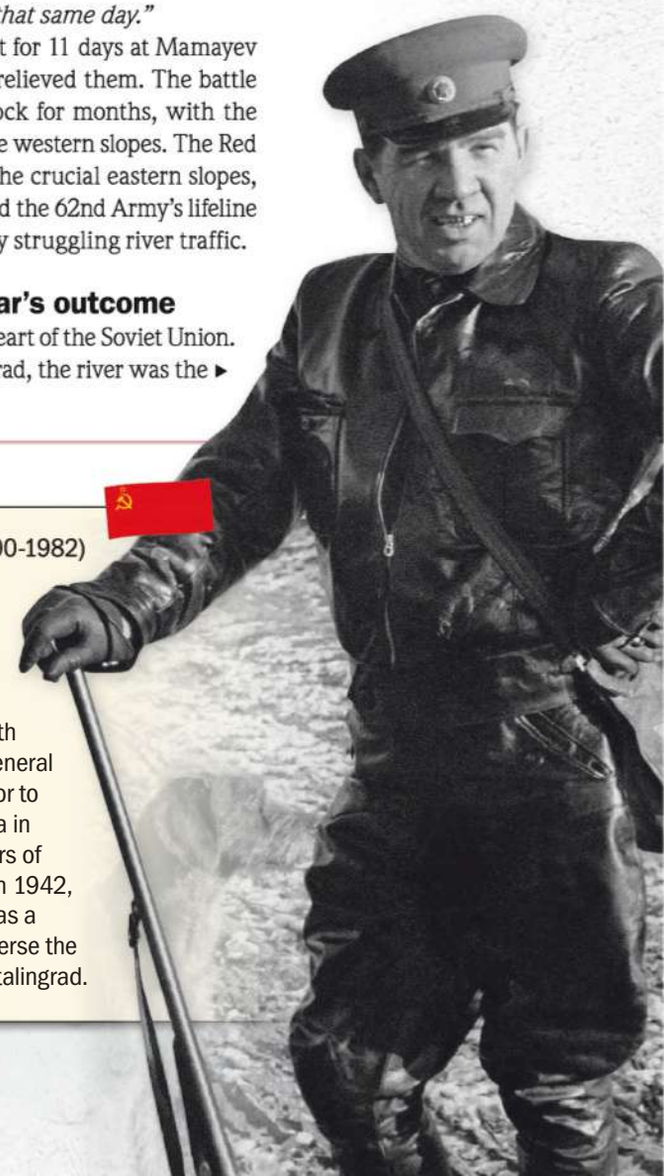
Maznitsa's soldiers fought for 11 days at Mamayev Kurgan before a fresh unit relieved them. The battle for the hill was in a deadlock for months, with the Germans mainly holding the western slopes. The Red Army stubbornly clung to the crucial eastern slopes, which guarded and protected the 62nd Army's lifeline across the Volga, the already struggling river traffic.

Volga was vital to war's outcome

The Volga was not just the heart of the Soviet Union. During the Battle of Stalingrad, the river was the ▸

FACTS

The Soviet counter-attacks in Stalingrad slowed the German advance, but cost dearly in lives; **30% of the 13th Guards Rifle Division died** within 24 hours of being in the city. Only 320 out of 10,000 soldiers survived the battle.



VASILY CHUIKOV (1900-1982)
The son of a peasant, Chuikov enjoyed respect, thanks to his stature and strength. He won the high regard of privates by staying with them at the front. The general served as military advisor to Chiang Kai-shek in China in 1941, far from the horrors of the new Eastern Front. In 1942, Chuikov was brought in as a breath of fresh air to reverse the smouldering failure of Stalingrad.

lifeblood of the Red Army. The influx of new soldiers and supplies across the river could only just keep the war machine fed, enabling the 62nd Army to hold the city's front line. Every vessel's journey across the 1.5-kilometre-wide river was therefore crucial for Chuikov, his troops and the fate of the Soviet Union. Troops, weapons, ammunition and supplies were transported on barges, cutters, rowing boats and steamers. The ships operated almost exclusively after nightfall, when conditions for Luftwaffe aircraft were more difficult than during the day.

"'The crossing operates from 18.00 until 04.30,' [one of the men said]. 'We camouflage [the boats], bringing them under cover of the bank and trees. The steam pinnace Donbass *is hidden inside a destroyed barge. … It's very hard when there's a moon. It's beautiful, but damn the beauty,"* reported journalist Vasily Grossman.

At the crossing points on the eastern side of the Volga, the Soviets had set up field kitchens with ovens dug into the earth that made hot food, which was transported across the river in insulated boxes. Weapons and ammunition were also taken as secretly as possible across the river, where Grossman saw the boxes being unloaded while *"smoke canisters are burned constantly to camouflage the crossing".*

The correspondent also observed the troops taking their places along the bank, with a one-way ticket to hell. They could see the city smoking on the opposite side and hear the shots and shells ringing out into the

MACHINE GUN

PPSh-41

Bullets rained from copied machine gun

The combination of pistol ammunition and machine gun firing rate made the Soviet machine guns ideal for street fighting in Stalingrad. But the compact firearms were an invention the Soviets had stolen from another enemy.

In the Soviet Union, the modern machine gun of the 1930s was not considered very useful. But attitudes changed completely when the Soviets saw the Finns firing bursts of cartridges with great accuracy from their Suomi KP/-31 in the Winter War of 1939-40.

So, at the end of 1941, Soviet weapons engineer Georgy Shpagin designed the Pistolet-Pulemyot Shpagina, or PPSh-41 – an almost faithful replica of the Finnish submachine gun. The model's clear advantage was that it was cheap and easy to produce.

The PPSh-41 machine gun went into mass production in mid-1942. Soldiers in Stalingrad liked the fast-firing weapon, which shot 900 rounds per minute – almost twice as many as the Germans' MP-40. The PPSh-41, nicknamed "daddy", therefore also became popular with Soviet soldiers when fighting in the streets and factories. The Soviets produced about six million of them during the war.



MATERIALS: The PPSh-41 was produced from readily available materials, primarily wood and steel. Its simplicity made the weapon durable and required little maintenance. The machine gun weighed less than its Finnish source of inspiration, increasing recoil and reducing accuracy.

In some places you had to move two or three dead bodies aside to lie down. ■ **Company Commander Nikolai Maznitsa on Mamayev Kurgan.**

night. Soon they would be fighting in the ruins. But the boat trip was as dangerous as the city battles.

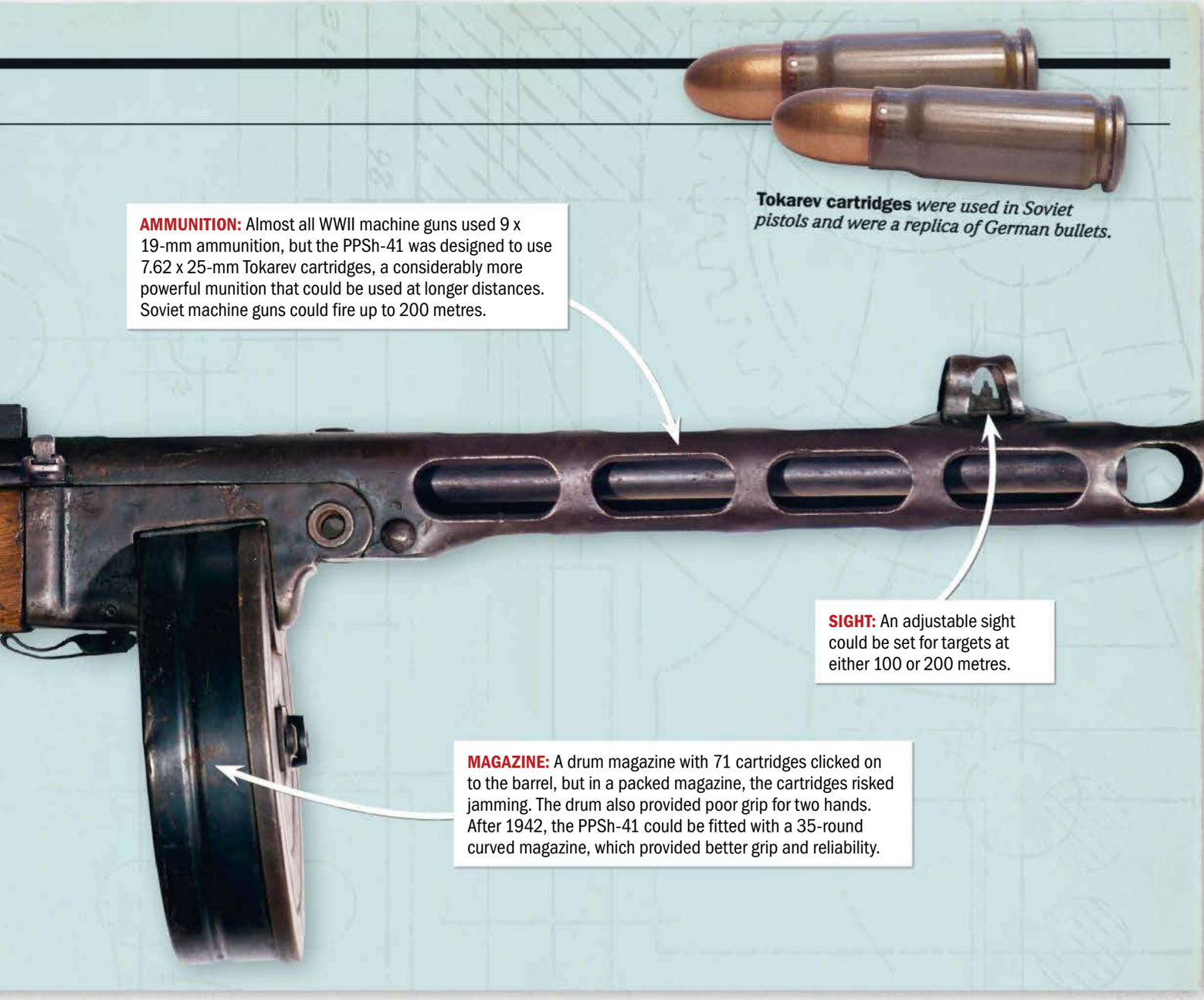
"The crossing was under constant fire. The riverbank was ironed flat. It was being shelled the whole time," said Chuikov.

Both aircraft and artillery threatened the crossing. Artillerymen lit up the river with flares and fired shells at anything that moved on the water. The Soviet soldiers were terrified as they boarded the boats, scrambling up the railing so they could jump into the water if the boat was hit. Officers removed the men, noted machine-gunner Aleksandr Gordeev, as his comrades reluctantly went into the hold.

"The officers made them move down by kicking them, NCOs were swearing and shouting. Baida [his petty officer] and two big sailors were grabbing men who resisted and pushing them down the ladder. Crates of shells, bullets and rations were brought aboard. Looking at the stack of ammunition boxes five steps from our Maxim gun, I could imagine what would happen if they were hit," recalled Gordeev, who became even more alarmed when a ferry full of wounded Soviets heading in the opposite direction was hit: *"There was a general, continuous howling sound that swelled above the bomb explosions."*

Grossman saw hundreds of vessels destroyed, and through interviews with survivors, the correspondent recreated some of the horrors of the Soviet infantry:

"Men on the barges, ferries and motorboats were silent. … Suddenly, a tall and thin bluish-white ▸



Tokarev cartridges *were used in Soviet pistols and were a replica of German bullets.*

column of water sprang up about 50 metres from the barge. Immediately after it another column grew and collapsed even closer, and then a third one. Bombs were exploding on the surface of the water, and the Volga was covered with lacerated foamy wounds; shells began to hit the sides of the barge. Injured men would cry out softly, as if trying to conceal the fact of being wounded. By then, rifle bullets had already started whistling over the water. There was one terrible moment when a large calibre shell hit the side of a small ferry. There was a flash of flame, dark smoke enveloped the ferry, an explosion was heard, and immediately afterwards, a drawling scream as if born from this thunder. Thousands of people saw immediately the green helmets of the men swimming among the wreckage of wood rocking on the surface of water," Grossman wrote, noting that the Volga was no longer the idyllic river it had once been.

"The quiet, clear Volga is terrifying like a scaffold," was the verdict from Grossman's pen. But those who survived the scaffold ended up in the slaughterhouse.

Soldiers fought in factory halls

Cadet Viktor Kartashev had been commissioned as a machine-gunner in the 193rd Rifle Division. He arrived at the Volga as one of thousands of young Soviets in late September to be taken by rowing boat to the factory areas at the northern end of Stalingrad, where the Germans were attacking in force.

"We went up to the water's edge, one platoon at a time. Four or five men climbed into each boat. Each one went 30 or 40 metres upstream, then crossed quickly to the opposite bank of the river, propelled by the powerful strokes of the experienced ferrymen. Several mortar shells plopped into the water behind us, bringing up a huge column of water. As soon as the boats reached the bank, we jumped into the water," recalled Kartashev, sailing on 27th September.

The industrial zone contained huge facilities, such as the Tractor Plant, which produced tanks, the Barrikady Factory, which made anti-tank guns, and the Red October steelworks. The factories were labyrinthine complexes of large halls and smaller workshops. The Germans had been attacking the area since 13th September, but on 26th September, the Wehrmacht launched a major assault on the factories, which were still churning out equipment despite the fighting. The Soviets threw all their strength into defending the area, even though German tanks and artillery had demolished the factories. At Red October, Kartashev and his comrades fought for every metre.

"Our tunics were soaked in sweat and clinging to our backs. The grit was crunching in our teeth. … We had to sling our guns over our shoulders when we moved, and that made it difficult for us to run. Bullets were whistling past, mortars were exploding, but we couldn't see the Germans at all. They had taken cover behind piles of rubble in wrecked buildings. … Whenever we moved to new positions, I would immediately set about digging in," Kartashev wrote.

Soldiers on both sides struggled to find their bearings in the dust, so battles over tiny areas dragged on. After several days, Kartashev and a fellow soldier holed up in the basement of Red October. They held out, but Kartashev barely recognised his comrade:

"He was so dirty that his eyes and teeth seemed to sparkle against the grime which covered the rest of him, and his eyes had become sunken from too many sleepless nights. … It was hard to stay awake: the sleepless nights were really taking their toll. My eyelids were getting heavier and heavier with every minute. … We never took off our boots and would take it in turns to get some sleep, which we did with our weapons in our hands. We would put our helmets on and rest our heads against a brick."

Worst of all, however, was the meagre amount of water and provisions the soldiers received.

"In the basement there was some sort of half-collapsed pit with water in it. None of us knew what kind of water it was, but we were thirsty, so we had no choice but to drink it. … [M]any of us got stomach upsets from drinking this water. It was very difficult getting food to us. … Bread was sent in sacks, so we only got crusts and crumbs," Kartashev recalled.

Many Soviet soldiers died in the factories, but German losses were just as great. On 2nd October, Wilhelm Hoffman was sent from the silos to the industrial area. On the same day, he noted in his diary, *"In Stalingrad, anyone can die at any moment."*

His morale did not improve during the fighting in the war-torn factory halls.

"We are in a new part of town for us. Though it is night, I can see many crosses with our helmets on top of them. Can we really have lost so many men? God damn this Stalingrad," he wrote.

Bomb hit Chuikov's headquarters

While soldiers in both camps dreamt of an end to the fighting, Hitler had other plans. As early as 30th ▸

STRENGTH RATIO

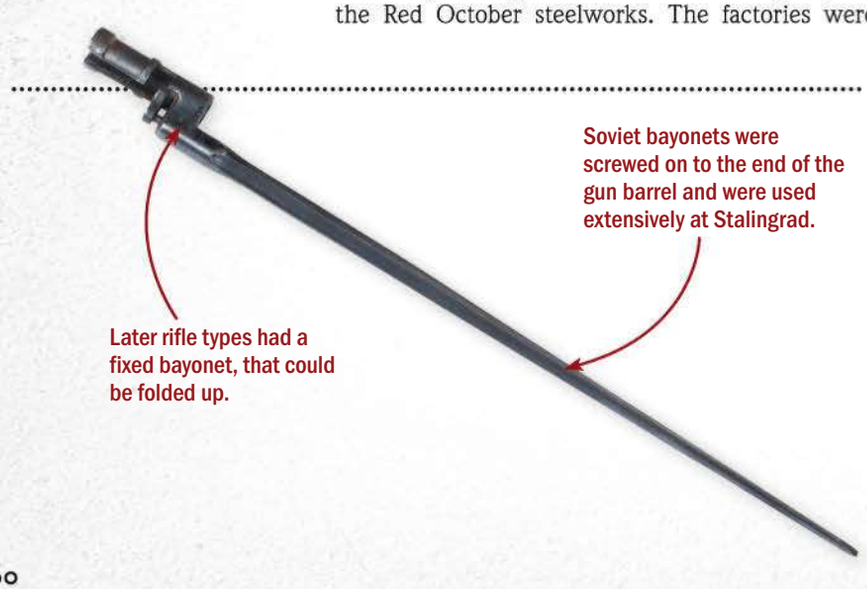
As the battle for Stalingrad peaked, **the Soviets had**

1,143,000

soldiers at the front. On the German side there were

1,040,000

troops, of which about 50 percent were from Hungary, Italy and Romania.





The mastermind behind the AK-47 *got the idea for the iconic assault rifle in 1942 when he heard a compatriot complaining about his machine gun.*

Stalingrad was a school for snipers

During long expeditions in Stalingrad's ruins, the Soviet Union's most skilled snipers taught young Soviets to kill Germans from a distance. The training made death omnipresent for the enemy.

For Vasily Zaitsev, hunting had been a way of life since his childhood in the Ural Mountains. There he learned from a young age to kill prey to put meat on the table. When Zaitsev volunteered for the Stalingrad Front, he impressed army command by eliminating 40 German soldiers in just ten days. One-man warfare didn't come as easily to other young Soviets, so Zaitsev, only 27, was put in charge of training snipers in the city.

Zaitsev's students received theory and marksmanship training in a forge, then got hands-on experience in the art of killing during missions in the ruins. Among other things, they learned that if they took down too many victims from the same position, they'd expose their hiding place:

"As a rule, you would always be spotted by the time you had killed five or six Fritzes from the same lair. The Germans would then usually try to flush you out with mortar or artillery fire," explained another sniper, Mikhail Mamekov. So, the students had to constantly move between hiding spots.

Zaitsev was also very aware that *"when someone shoots in the dark you can see the flash clearly".* That's why he spent night-time finding new hiding places and daylight hours lying with his rifle. According to star pupil Anatoly Chekhov, sunlight also caused problems: *"When it was sunny, there was a shadow on the wall when I moved [so] I didn't shoot them when it was sunny,"* he said.

Over 250 lives *were claimed by Vasily Zaitsev (left) with a sniper rifle. He was self-taught.*



September, the Führer had proclaimed in a speech to Berliners that *"no human being shall ever push us away from that spot".* Fourteen days later, Hitler cancelled all other operations on the Eastern Front, partly because the Germans had stalled in their search for oil in the Caucasus. Thus, the original objective of the 1942 offensive was finally dropped.

Instead, all efforts were to be focused on the capture of Stalingrad. On 14th October, the Luftwaffe attacked with renewed vigour, and Paulus sent four fresh battalions into the city – mainly against the factories to the north, where Chuikov was also headquartered. The Soviet commander remembered the day as the darkest of the whole battle:

"[T]hey were shelling and bombing us more than ever, we could hardly breathe. We stayed in our ravine. They bombed and shelled away, started fires. They knew our army's command post was there. And so were eight fuel tanks. Every one of them was leaking. Fuel flowed down into the dugout of our chief of artillery. Everything caught fire, and it was burning for a whole kilometre along the bank of the Volga. The fire lasted three days on end. We were afraid of being suffocated or being so poisoned by fumes that the enemy would be able to take us alive."

On 14th October alone, 61 Russians lost their lives in Chuikov's HQ. The general and his staff were subjected to such a massive bombardment that their soup *"came to the table with shell fragments in it".*

When, after three days, Yeremenko asked over the radio where exactly the army commander was in the chaos,

People think that urban warfare is a matter of walking down a street and shooting. That's nonsense. The streets are empty. ■ General Vasily Chuikov on how urban warfare was fought indoors.



With lives at stake, *tugs and barges carried weapons and food to Stalingrad. The Volga River was the city's only supply line.*

Chuikov's answer was not reassuring: *"We're where the most flames and smoke are."*

However, Chuikov held out for three relentless days until General Ivan Lyudnikov's 138th Rifle Division was transported across the Volga and came to the aid of the hard-pressed Soviets in the factory area. People like Kartashev finally got a chance to rest. For a while, the Red Army had kept the enemy at bay. But German General Friedrich Paulus's troops pushed further north towards the Volga, capturing the Tractor Plant along the way. From the air, the German pilots couldn't comprehend how the soldiers on the ground continued to fight in the bombed-out city.

"I cannot understand how men can survive such a hell, yet the Russians sit tight in the ruins, and holes and cellars, and a chaos of steel skeletons which used to be factories," wrote pilot Herbert Pabst.

For the soldiers on the ground, it was frustrating that their superior might couldn't crush the Soviets.

"Factory walls, assembly lines, the whole superstructure collapses under the storm of bombs but the enemy reappears and utilises these newly created ruins to fortify his defensive positions," wrote German General Karl Strecker to a friend.

Strecker's complaint painted an accurate picture of the Germans' problem in Stalingrad. The rubble stopped the Nazis from trampling over the enemy.

Heavy guns played key role

German blitzkrieg tactics of combined air and ground attacks were a success on the plains of the Eastern Front. In September, the Germans still had the benefit of tanks in Stalingrad, but after a month of fighting and air strikes, every road had turned to rubble.

"After 14th October, the enemy tanks hadn't been able to operate because the terrain was too broken up," said Chuikov. Indeed, German Panzer Major Rolf Grams found that the ruins and mines made life difficult for his tanks.

"[Our] tanks climbed mounds of rubble and scrap, and crept screeching through chaotically destroyed workshops and fired at point-blank range in narrow yards. Many of the tanks shook or exploded from the force of an exploding enemy mine," the major said.

The Red Army also began to lure the German tanks into traps. While the armoured vehicles fought their way through the streets, the Soviets hid in buildings or sewers, then stormed forward to fire anti-tank rifles at the machines from behind. Often, the tanks couldn't escape because it took too long to manoeuvre in the ruins. Other times, the Soviets threw Molotov cocktails at the tanks from the top of the buildings.

Tanks became less useful for both camps, and instead artillery took a larger role. Because Chuikov had limited space for heavy artillery between the shattered buildings on the west side, the commander withdrew all guns and howitzers larger than 76 mm to the east. The gun crews received coordinates by radio or field telephone from binocular-bearing artillery observers hiding in the buildings at the front. Then the batteries unleashed their full force.

"On the other side of the Volga, it seemed as if the whole universe shook with the mighty roaring of the heavy guns," wrote Vasily Grossman.

Meanwhile, the famous Katyusha rocket launchers constantly played their terrifying, howling tune, which had earned them the nickname Stalin organs.

"Continuing to move forward, we were repeatedly caught between the detonating Stalin organ rockets … They had a depressing effect," said German Wigand Wüster. The Germans knew shells were coming whenever they heard the Stalin organ. As ▸



21/9 A 35-metre-high grain silo towers at the southern end of Stalingrad. The sides are fighting so close together they can hear the enemy breathing. After five days, the Germans capture the silo.

did the Soviets when the Stuka sirens wailed. Wüster led an artillery unit that used horses to move their 150-mm guns to positions from which they could fire on the enemy's defences. The unit followed scouts who found safe routes through the outskirts of the city. In October, Wüster's men were ordered to shell the factory buildings to the north.

"After carefully guiding in our shells, our 150-cm rounds tore holes in the thick brick walls. Nevertheless, levelling the building could not be contemplated. Only after several attempts, did our neighbours enter the factory ... [O]ur artillery support had to cease once our troops were inside. ... A minimum safe distance of 200 metres had to be kept because of straying shells," Wüster reported.

The Soviets quickly realised where the shells were coming from and turned their own artillery on the Germans. A wagon with six horses stood ready to quickly move the gun if the position was not hidden and reinforced with railway sleepers, concrete or other solid materials. These heavy guns played an important role but, according to Wüster, were never used in the centre of Stalingrad.

"We could not intervene in the actual house-to-house fighting. The hard work there was done with hand grenades and submachine guns, from one side of the street to the other, from house to house, from floor to floor and even from room to room. The Russians doggedly held on to the ruins of the city with a stubbornness that was beyond their already impressive fighting spirit and morale. They did this so effectively that we could barely make any further headway," explained Wüster, who considered himself lucky not to be among the soldiers who had to fight in the dirt and muck, like rats in the sewer.

Red Army breathed down enemy's neck

The Germans had so far counted their progress in kilometres, but in Stalingrad they measured their advance in metres. The army had little experience of street fighting and quickly learned that superior equipment offered no advantage in the ruins. Even their greater numbers were difficult to exploit against the Soviets, who barricaded themselves in the ruins.

"It was a terrible, exhausting battle, on and below the ground, in ruins, cellars and factory sewers. A battle of man against man," said Major Rolf Grams.

In reality, the Red Army had little experience of urban warfare either, but Vasily Chuikov soon worked out what was required. He introduced a tactic that ordered the Soviet infantry to *"hug the enemy"* by taking up positions close to the Germans. The strategy eliminated the possibility of air support because the Luftwaffe risked bombing its own.

"Sometimes, the trenches dug by the battalion are 20 metres from the enemy. The sentry can hear soldiers walking in the German trench and ▸

FACTS

Mamayev Kurgan was so ravaged by the battle that every square metre was covered by

500-1,250

bullets and bomb fragments. For a year after, no grass could grow on the mound.

25/9 The train station in Stalingrad falls after ten days of fighting. On the first day, it changes hands 14 times in six hours.

17/10 Mamayev Kurgan is taken. However, the Soviets continue to attack and shell it, stopping the enemy using the ridge militarily.

1/11 The Soviets stand in a factory hall in the Red October steelworks, the heart of the industrial city. The Germans abandon the assault.



Soviet nurses patch up soldiers *in the ruins. In the Red Army, both women and men filled the role.*

HOW...

...civilians survived among the rubble

Stalingrad's remaining inhabitants lived in cellars, sewers and holes as history's worst battles unfolded in the city. Shelling, cold and hunger were an ever-present threat to civilian life.

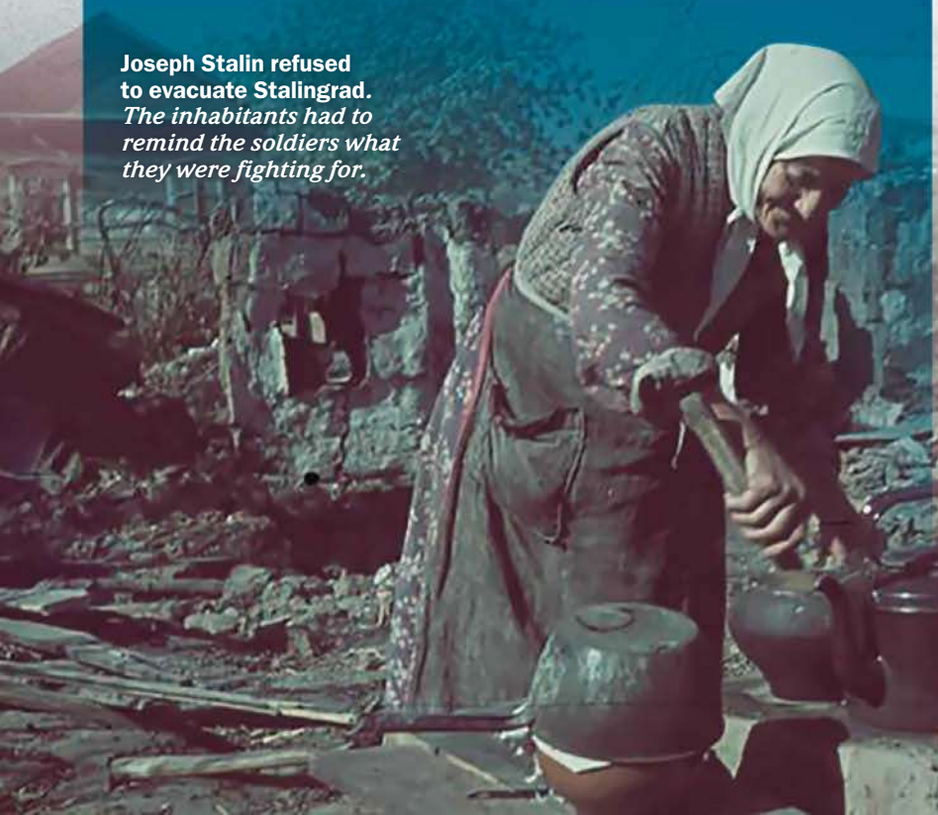
While everyone knew that war was approaching, some 150,000 civilians were in Stalingrad when German troops attacked on 13th September 1942. Many residents had fled after the Luftwaffe bombings in August, but just as many elderly people, factory workers, women and children stayed because they didn't want to leave everything they owned behind. Others remained because of the risks of leaving during the coming winter, when cold and disease were major hazards.

"I could have got out of the city, but all my children were sick at the time," said cook Agrafena Pozdnyakova, who lost her husband and two of her six children to artillery during the fighting.

Pozdnyakova saw her home wrecked by bombs and shells. She sought shelter in cellars, sewers and holes in the rubble with her children. Many also sought refuge along the Volga, digging caves in the steep banks. The sight shocked a Soviet commander:

"I shall never forget the scene that opened out before me. This gully, which stretched to my left and right, swarmed with life, just like an anthill dotted with caves. Entire streets had been excavated on either side. The mouths of the caves were covered with charred boards and rags. The women had utilised everything that could be of service. ... [T]he struggle being waged is for life or death," he wrote.

In October, the Germans ordered civilians on long marches to camps in the west, but 15,000 hid in Stalingrad throughout the battle. They were exposed to German and Soviet artillery, but many died of cold and starvation. The survivors coped by eating dead animals and stealing wheat from German depots that eventually ran out.



Joseph Stalin refused to evacuate Stalingrad. *The inhabitants had to remind the soldiers what they were fighting for.*

arguments when Germans divide up the food. He can hear all night the tap dance of a German sentry in his torn boots. ... They [Soviet soldiers] can build trenches that are so good that you wouldn't notice soldiers in them even if you step on their heads," Chuikov reported during the battle.

The general also established storm groups – small units of eight to 20 men – that boldly stormed buildings that were in German hands.

"We didn't just receive attacks, we had to attack," Chuikov pointed out. *"People think that urban warfare is a matter of walking down a street and shooting. That's nonsense. The streets are empty and the fighting is going on in the buildings, in structures and courtyards where you've got to pluck the enemy out with bayonets and grenades. For those fights, our men love the Fenya, which is what they call our hand grenade."*

In addition to their Fenya, the assault groups were equipped with machine guns, flamethrowers, knives and spades that could be used to crush skulls. The storm groups' favourite tactic was to blast a hole in a wall with an anti-tank gun, then the soldiers would surge forward and throw grenades through the hole. Basements were cleared with more grenades. Before entering a room, a soldier threw in a Fenya and shot through the smoke with his machine gun. Alternatively, a soldier with a flamethrower turned the room into a furnace. Some preferred to attack the enemy with knives when space was tight in narrow corridors or small rooms.

"This kind of close combat is unlike anything else. Once you are inside a building a machine gun is no longer any use, there is no time to load it, and no room to use it effectively. Knives and small, sharp spades are the best weapons for storm group fighting – it is all about physical toughness and quick reflexes," wrote a Soviet soldier.

Many buildings had to be taken room by room. Some soldiers said it was *"like a layered cake"*, when the Germans defended themselves on the middle floors of a house, while the Soviets stormed in from the ground floor and the roof at the same time. Chuikov constantly sent storm groups out at night to keep the enemy at bay. The German soldiers hated the chaotic warfare, which didn't follow traditional military code. Their will was worn down by never knowing where the enemy was. Thus, Chuikov's plan that *"every German must be made to feel that he was living under the muzzle of a Russian gun"* worked to perfection.

The Germans called this type of fighting

Knives and small, sharp spades are the best weapons for storm group fighting – it is all about physical toughness and quick reflexes. ■ **Unknown Soviet soldier on the battles from room to room.**



A machine-gunner covers a storm group *in the process of capturing a position. The DP-27 rifle, known as the record player, was a light weapon, well suited to the task.*

Rattenkrieg – rat war – because the Soviets crawled through the sewers to attack from the rear. Wilhelm Hoffman had fought at the factories but was in despair at the warfare in the city.

"You can't see them: they hide in buildings and basements and strike at us from all sides – even from the rear. Such barbarians, to use gangster tactics against us. Russian soldiers have suddenly reappeared in a sector which we occupied two days ago, and the battle has begun all over again. Our people are getting killed not just in the front line, but in rear sectors that we already have," Hoffman scribbled in his diary.

The Soviets also felt bitter about the battles, as they fought for days over the same building in the city's burning inferno.

"We have fought for 15 days for a single house, with mortars, machine guns, grenades and bayonets. The front is a corridor between burnt-out rooms," an officer told Vasily Grossman.

"The street is no longer measured in metres, but in corpses. Stalingrad is no longer a town. By day it is an enormous cloud of burning, blinding smoke … And when night arrives – one of those scorching, howling, bleeding nights – the dogs plunge into the Volga and swim desperately for the other bank. The nights of Stalingrad are a terror for them. Animals flee this hell; the hardest stones cannot bear it for long; only men endure," the officer recounted. The Soviets' nerves were also frayed by the fighting, but the soldiers fought on steadfastly. The future of the motherland depended on their courage.

Pavlov's men held out for months

Chuikov had decreed in his Order No. 179 that storm groups of a few men would take houses and hold them until joined by *"a consolidation group, [with] ammunition and food for six days"*, after which each *"building shall become a towering fortress"*. The idea was that a few soldiers would be able to withstand German counter-attacks. A prime example of this strategy was seen at Pavlov's House.

On 27th September, a group of four soldiers, led by Sergeant Yakov Pavlov, sneaked into a four-storey building on Penzenskaya Street, 100 metres behind enemy lines. According to one of Pavlov's men, *"it stuck out into the German defences"*. No Germans ▸



An endless nightmare awaited the Germans *at the Tractor Plant and in other industrial districts. Despite fierce fighting, the Soviets held on to the factories.*



were in the building, however, when the Soviet squad searched the house under cover of darkness.

That night, the Germans realised there was activity inside the building, but it was too late. Reinforcements had already arrived at Pavlov's House, and just over 50 men stood ready to defend the property, which was already mined and surrounded by barbed wire. Machine guns and anti-tank rifles stuck out of the windows on the top floor, mowing down the Germans every time they began to attack.

"We ran the house on a shift system, while one group of between 30 to 40 men would be on duty, watching for a German attack, the other would be busy gathering wood or preparing food. When I was not artillery spotting, I kept watch with the rest of the soldiers. I occupied the same vantage point as Pavlov – we threw grenades together and ate from the same ration tin," reported one of the house's defenders, Georgi Potanski.

The building on Penzenskaya Street was soon nicknamed Pavlov's House, although the eponymous sergeant lost command when a higher-ranking officer arrived. His name was Lieutenant Ivan Afanasyev:

"I told Pavlov my name and why I was there. 'Excellent,' he said. 'We could use a bit of help.' … Pavlov led me down a narrow corridor and into the basement. A kerosene lamp was burning. In the middle of the room stood a table, like a carpenter's bench. On it lay a box of shells and about a dozen grenades. In one corner there was an iron bedstead, on which there was an untidy pile of blankets and pillows."

Immediately, Afanasyev set about orchestrating a heroic defence that, week after week, beat the frustrated German troops back from the building.

"Our guns hammered away at the enemy. The Nazis reeled back, but almost immediately threw themselves into the attack once more. This happened time after time. … Pavlov would hurl a grenade at anyone who dared come close to the house. … We were nearly out of grenades and started throwing bricks instead," recalled Afanasyev.

Snipers lay in wait

By then, the Soviets had been defending Pavlov's House for an unimaginable two months. The remaining survivors prepared to fight to the last inside the building. *"We'll die before we let the Germans pass us,"* one of the Soviet soldiers scratched on a wall of the house.

But in late November, the Germans gave up trying to enter the battered building. The army needed ▸▸

Molotov cocktails were thrown at German tanks.



A windproof match, for example, could be used as a fuse.

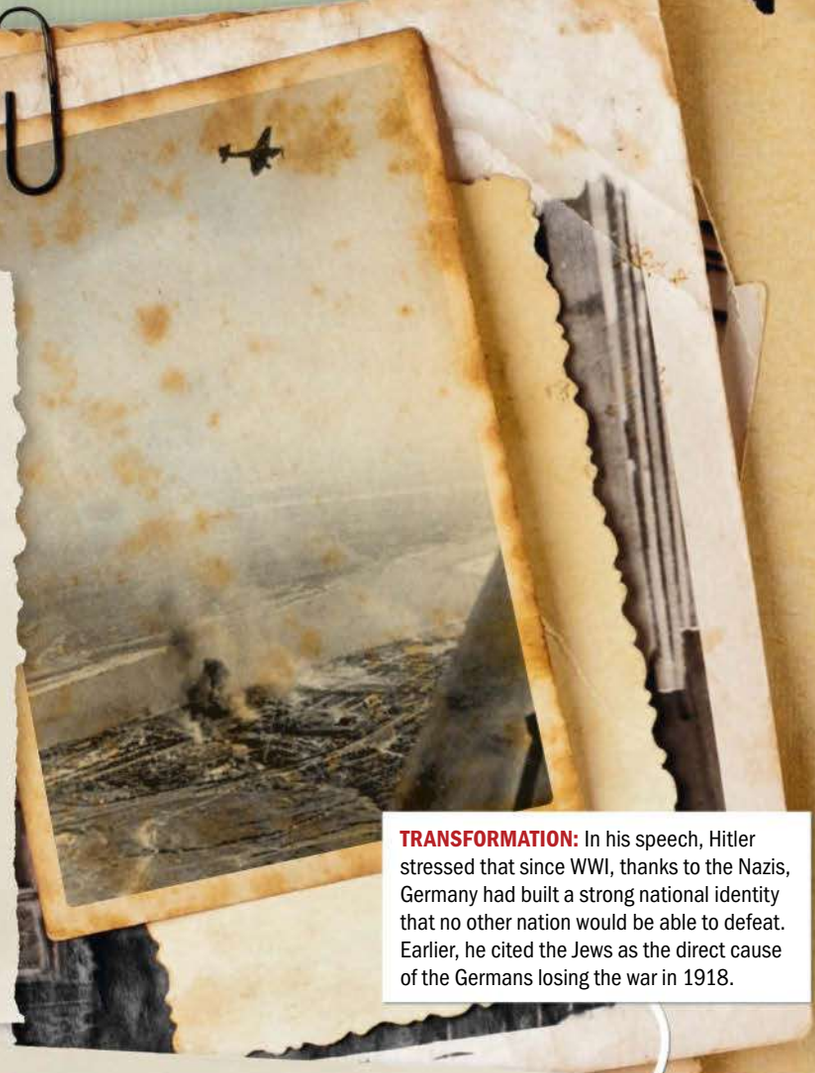
Hitler considered Stalingrad won

During the Battle of Stalingrad, Adolf Hitler delivered a fateful speech in the Bürgerbräukeller in Munich, where 19 years earlier he'd launched an attempted coup. The Führer hailed the rapid advance to the east while explaining why the enemy was corrupt, a failure, run by Jews – and doomed to lose.

ENEMY: Hitler began by naming the Jews as the enemy ruling the countries Nazi Germany was fighting. Worst of all was the Soviet Union, his message went.

Our opponents are the same, and behind these opponents there stands the same eternally driving force, the international Jew. And it is again by no means an accident that these forces were on the inside, and have now met again on the outside. Internally, in the 'coalition', which we know only too well, they included all the enemies of the Reich, beginning with the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, and the entire stock market speculator-group, all the way to the *Rote Fahne [Red Banner,* Socialist newspaper] in Berlin, and everything which lay in between.

Outside, we have again today the same coalition as before, from the chief of that international Masonic lodge, the half-Jew Roosevelt, and his Jewish brain trust, to the Jewry of purest water in Marxist-Bolshevik Russia. They are the same enemies as before, the same foes as then. In the World War we had them as external foes, in our struggle as internal foes, and now, as a National-Socialist State, as external foes again.



TRANSFORMATION: In his speech, Hitler stressed that since WWI, thanks to the Nazis, Germany had built a strong national identity that no other nation would be able to defeat. Earlier, he cited the Jews as the direct cause of the Germans losing the war in 1918.

[I]f anyone in the rest of the world imagines he can shatter this people, he does not know the enduring heart of this people today, nor the enduring power, the knowledge which guides this people politically today – the National Socialist Party and its mighty organisation.

I am calm therefore when I face any German who is fighting in the East, or who comes home on leave and I can tell each one of them, just look at our organisation. Compare our home cities, compare the workers' settlements which we are building, compare our social organisation with what you have seen on the other side. Compare the fate and the lot of the German farmer with the lot of that Russian farmer. Compare all of that, my dear friend, and then give me your judgment as to who has managed things better, and above all else, who has had more honourable intentions?

COMPARISON: Then Hitler measured Nazi Germany's strength against the Soviet Union and explained why Germany, alone, had created a successful socialist state. He used the comparison to portray the Soviets as an inferior enemy.



Hitler *addresses top Nazis in the beer hall on the anniversary of his failed coup.*

LIES: Official Soviet statements were denigrated as lies. Ironically, Hitler would claim that he had reached the Caucasus at breakneck speed.

STRATEGY: Adolf Hitler had a reputation for making rash decisions on the battlefield. In the speech, he discussed how he made them. For instance, in 1942, the Soviets expected the Germans to strike in the middle of the Eastern Front, near Moscow, as they had in 1941.

If you read the Russian communiqués since 22nd June, you will read the following every day: "Fighting of unimportant character" or maybe "of important character". "We have shot down three times as many German planes." ... They have so many of us missing that they amount to more divisions than we can ever muster. But above all, they are always fighting in the same place. Here and there they then say modestly, after 14 days, "We have evacuated a city." But in general, they have been fighting since 22nd June in the same place, always successfully; we are constantly being beaten back, and in this continued retreat we have slowly come to the Caucasus. I say "slowly"!

For the speed with which our soldiers have now traversed territory is gigantic. Also, what was traversed this year is vast and historically unique.

Now I do not always do things just as the others want them done. I consider what the others probably believe, and then do the opposite on principle. So, if Mr Stalin expected that we would attack in the centre, I did not want to attack in the centre, not only because Mr Stalin probably believed I would, but because I didn't care about it any more at all.

But I wanted to come to the Volga, to a definite place, to a definite city. It accidentally bears the name of Stalin himself, but do not think that I went after it on that account. Indeed, it could have an altogether different name.

CHANGE OF COURSE: The Führer explained the strategy behind setting course for Stalingrad and said the change of direction was not due to the fact that the city bore Stalin's name.

VICTORY: Luftwaffe bombing had rendered the Volga virtually useless as a transport route through the Soviet Union. Stalingrad was therefore as good as fallen, according to Hitler. But as he gave his speech, he knew the Soviets were holding out against an increasingly weakened enemy.

[Stalingrad] is an important point, that is, there 30 million tonnes of traffic can be cut off, including about nine million of oil shipments. There all the wheat pours in from those enormous territories of the Ukraine, of the Kuban territory, then to be transported to the north. There the manganese ore was forwarded. A gigantic terminal was there; I wanted to take it. And do you know, we're modest: that is, we have it; there are only a couple of very small places left there.

Now the others say: why aren't you fighting there? Because I don't want to make a second Verdun [World War I battle in which 70,000 soldiers died every month], but would rather do it with very small shock units. Time plays no part here. No ships come up the Volga any more –that is the decisive thing.

VERDUN: Approximately 714,000 soldiers died during the Battle of Verdun. In the Battle of Stalingrad, up to two million died in five and a half months.

At any rate, the Russians are not at the Pyrenees or before Seville; that, you see, is the same distance as for us to be in Stalingrad today, or on the Terek, let us say. But we are there; that can really not be disputed. That is a fact, after all.

Naturally, when nothing else will do any more, they also say it's a mistake. Then they suddenly turn around and say: "It is absolutely a mistake for the Germans to have gone to Kirkenes, or to have gone to Narvik, or now perhaps to Stalingrad. What do they expect to do in Stalingrad? For Stalingrad is a capital mistake, a strategic mistake." We will just wait and see whether that was a strategic mistake.



CONFIDENCE: Critics of the Third Reich were given a dressing-down. After the Battle of Stalingrad, Hitler acknowledged a German misstep for the first time.

The Soviets were short of men and ammo *in the autumn, but their machine gun offered a slight advantage in terms of superior firing rate, at 900 rounds per minute.*

soldiers elsewhere in Stalingrad, and the house no longer posed a threat. Moreover, the building had cost the Germans too dearly in human lives – according to General Chuikov, the Germans lost more soldiers trying to take Pavlov's House than during the capture of Paris. Although German soldiers were dropping like flies in the battle for Pavlov's House, the losses were nothing compared to how many soldiers were killed by a sniper's bullet. The Red Army had a large number of snipers, who worked as lone wolves or in small groups. The invisible killers found perfect hiding places on the top floors of Stalingrad's buildings, where they had a good view of enemy positions. Others hid in old barrels or pipes.

"Russian snipers hit anyone who is so careless as to show a glimpse of himself from behind his shelter," Wilhelm Hoffman wrote. Artilleryman Wigand Wüster also experienced the constant threat:

"Russian snipers ... were lurking everywhere, and many lone soldiers fell victim to them. ... It was wise to sprint from cover to cover."

Many Soviet sharpshooters went down in history as legends, filling the columns of Red Army newspapers week after week. The most famous was Vasily Zaitsev, who in October alone killed 149 Germans with his reliable Mosin rifle. He also trained young recruits in the art of killing from a distance.

"A sniper has got to be daring, cold-blooded and persistent; he must master his weapon, be a competent tactician and have good eyesight. These are the qualities that determine whether someone can be a sniper. I taught them and went out with them on ambushes," Zaitsev said afterwards.

One soldier who had all these qualities was Anatoly Chekhov, who was just 19 years old when he made his debut among Stalingrad's rubble. At first, however, his trigger finger failed him: *"When I first got the*



Right then I popped out of the trench, shouldered my rifle, and shot. I got him. ■ **Sniper Vasily Zaitsev on the hunt for a German sharpshooter.**

rifle, I couldn't bring myself to kill a living being: one German was standing there for about four minutes, talking, and I let him go. When I killed my first one, he fell at once. Another one ran out and stooped over the killed one, and I knocked him down, too.

"When I first killed, I was shaking all over: the man was only walking to get some water! ... I felt scared: I'd killed a person! Then I remembered our people and started killing them without mercy," said Chekhov, who after a few days as a sniper evolved into a cold-blooded killer, known as a *"hunter of two-legged animals".*

"I've become a beast of a man: I kill, I hate them as if it is a normal thing in my life. I've killed 40 men, three in the chest, the others in the head. When you fire, the head instantly jerks back or to the side. He throws up his arms and collapses," Chekhov told reporter Vasily Grossman, who profiled Soviet snipers in his front-line accounts.

Chekhov brought the lives of 256 German soldiers to an abrupt end during the Battle of Stalingrad. With patience and ruthlessness, Soviet snipers were unrivalled among the ruins. But they weren't alone.

Hunters chased each other

Scattered across the apocalyptic landscape, German riflemen also lay in wait with their sniper rifles. Often, though, the shooters ended up chasing each other for days. When an area was ravaged by long-range sniper bullets, both the Germans and the Soviets sent their best sniper after the enemy. No one was better at this than Zaitsev, who went on several missions against German snipers. One was in an area near Mamayev Kurgan, where the fighting surged back and forth.

"I set off. I encountered a skilled German sniper. I stuck a helmet out from a trench, and he shot it immediately. I had to work out where he was. This was very difficult to do because he'd shoot and kill you the moment you try to take a look. Which means you've got to trick him, outsmart him. ... I put my helmet on a parapet, he shoots, and the helmet goes flying. I hunted him for five hours," Zaitsev explained. He struggled to figure out where the German had dug himself in.

"I took off one of my mittens, put it on a board, and stuck it up out of the trench. The German thinks that someone is putting his hands up in surrender, that he doesn't want to fight. The German shoots. I take down the glove and see where it has been shot through. Based on the holes I work out where he's shooting from. ... I grabbed a trench periscope and started looking. I found him," Zaitsev recalled, though he couldn't get the enemy in his gunsight.

Instead, the Soviet had to wait for the German gunner to reveal himself. Finally, he got up to ▸



NEWS FROM THE FRONT:



The Sydney Morning Herald

22nd October 1942

Germans fail to exploit gains

Yet another pause, doubtless temporary, marks the long, drawn-out struggle for Stalingrad.

The Germans' latest offensive, now eight days old, has won them a threatening salient in the north-western industrial area, but for two days all the enemy's attempts to exploit his gains have failed.

Factors contributing to the Red Army's success are: one, the courage and tenacity of the garrison in withstanding one of the war's most concentrated bombardments; two, the deterioration of the weather; three, the reinforcement of the garrison across the heavily shelled and bombed Volga River; four, the increasing strain on the Germans of months of fighting.

Yesterday the enemy made two attacks in Stalingrad, led by 30 to 40 tanks, supported by many infantry battalions. Both were directed against the Red October factory, and both were repulsed.

This factory, which sprawls over 60 acres, has become the battle's focal point. It is the southernmost of the fortress-factories guarding the northern approaches, and if it falls, as the others have done, the remaining river crossings will be endangered and the city's further defence will become complicated.

Berlin Radio claims that the factory is surrounded. This is an obvious exaggeration.

German troops lost momentum *in September. The world press followed the important battle closely.*



SNOW IN STALINGRAD ZONE

ATTACKS IN CITY FAIL

RUSSIANS FIRM IN CAUCASUS

MUSTANGS' FEAT

Fighters Over Germany

FURTHER ALLIED GAIN IN NEW GUINEA

FLANK ATTACK SUCCEEDS

ENEMY SHIP HIT IN SOLOMONS

NOW ALLIED FORCE BROKE RANGES LINE

LATE NEWS

observe some Red Army troops. When he did, Zaitsev's punishment was swift.

"Right then I popped out of the trench, shouldered my rifle and shot. I got him."

Soldiers lived on cigarettes and vodka

The threat of snipers was just one of the many dangers lurking in Stalingrad. Death hung in the air, accompanied by an endless cacophony of machine-gun crackles and thunderous explosions. There was never silence. When the guns fell quiet, the wails of wounded comrades grated on the soldiers' nerves.

"It's not a human sound, just the dull cry of suffering of a wild animal," wrote German war correspondent Clemens Podewils, who'd followed the 6th Army from its advance across the steppe and into the city. At the front, compatriots were dropping like flies. Soldiers never know whether the comrades they woke up with would still be alive at the end of the day. The constant reminder of death broke their spirit.

"Men and officers alike have become bitter and silent. … We have lost many men; every time you move you have to jump over bodies. … The soldiers are calling Stalingrad the mass grave of the Wehrmacht," wrote Wilhelm Hoffman.

Even the hard-boiled General Chuikov found it all too much at times.

"There's firing and thunder all around. You send off a liaison officer to find out what's happening, and he gets killed. That's when you shake all over with tension," Chuikov revealed in a rare candid moment. Normally he kept up an impenetrable façade, with little compassion for his troops, because the general knew full well that every soldier who crossed the Volga to Stalingrad faced a tough time.

"Approaching this place, soldiers used to say: 'We are entering hell.' And after spending one or two days here, they said: 'No, this isn't hell, this is ten times worse than hell,'" the general elaborated.

In both camps, soldiers therefore looked forward to breaks, when they could forget the horrors surrounding them. Meals were a highlight – especially when there was enough food in the bowls. But for both Fritz and Ivan, a cigarette was almost preferable to a slice of bread. The Soviets were given a small daily ration of Russian-grown tobacco, called *machorka,* which they liked to roll in newspaper. Many even claimed that the newspaper's ink was an important part of the taste. The smoking breaks, which both sides tried to drag out for as long as possible, help to ease frayed nerves and remind the soldiers of a carefree existence far from the hell of Stalingrad.

The Germans also used their breaks to relax with card games, which the Soviets didn't understand at all when they surprised unwary Germans, cards in hand. They counted themselves lucky that the Red Army didn't supply its troops with playing cards, but instead distributed vodka as part of the field rations. For a brief period, vodka was even parachuted into Soviet positions by Polikarpov dive-bombers.

"We used to slow down and shout: 'Ivan! Vodka's coming!'" one pilot recalled.

The Soviets' daily vodka consumption was measured in grams. When the bottle was passed around and cups were filled halfway with 100 grams of vodka, it was the highlight of the day. But the strain of combat was so great that soldiers could rarely get enough alcohol. Medical alcohol was also happily downed, and during the fighting in the factory area, industrial alcohol never stayed long on the shelves. Even antifreeze was poured through the activated

We were worn down, nearly out of ammunition. We had limited supplies. ■ General Chuikov about his troops' desperate situation.

carbon in gas masks and consumed, even though it could blind the soldiers.

Letters from home, however, were the greatest ray of hope for the majority of German and Soviet soldiers in Stalingrad. The feeling of receiving a battered envelope and being transported back home to loved ones surpassed even the most desperately wanted shot of vodka. Then the soldiers were reminded of what they were fighting the hopeless battles for.

"I can't stop worrying. I know that you are fighting constantly. I will always be your faithful wife. My life belongs to you and to our world," were a German wife's reassuring words to her husband, while a Soviet soldier called Kolya wrote a letter to his chosen one, Mariya, remembering the past: *"I think you will remember our last evening together. Because now, this minute, it is exactly a year since we were parted. And it was very difficult for me to say goodbye."*

The soldiers read the missives again and again, and often kept their most recent letter close to their heart.

"'I am very happy that you are fighting so well and have been awarded a medal. Fight to the last drop of your blood," a Soviet spouse urged her husband, Lieutenant Charnosov, in a letter found on his body. Soldiers found many unanswered letters in pockets when they searched the uniforms of their dead compatriots for identification papers. A fallen Soviet soldier carried a message from his young son:

"I miss you very much. Please come and visit, I so want to see you, if only for one hour. My tears pour as I write this. Daddy, please come and see us."

Winter came to the Volga

During October, the temperature dropped drastically in Stalingrad, and freezing winds burned soldiers' faces red. By the end of the month, frost set in, erasing the memory of summer's blazing heat on the barren plains outside the city. From the northern reaches, huge blocks of ice the size of ships broke free and began to flow down the Volga.

"'The ice floes collide, crumble and grind against each other, and the swishing sound, like that of shifting sands, can be heard quite a distance from the bank," noted Vasily Grossman.

General Chuikov and his commanders knew that the change in the weather could be a decisive advantage for the Soviets. But first Stalingrad had to undergo a week-long transition from the cold autumn to the harsh winter, which left the city cut off and vulnerable.

"In early November the absolute worst thing was the Volga. It was starting to ice up, but the river ▸

General Chuikov was often in mortal danger *because he placed his headquarters close to the front. At one point, the Germans were only 800 metres away.*



was still flowing. There was no regular river transport. The armoured cutters couldn't get through. In other words, we weren't getting supplies. The planes could only drop supplies at night because they couldn't come out during the day. … Sometimes what they dropped would hit the bank, sometimes it would go to the enemy, sometimes to us. … We were worn down, nearly out of ammunition. We had limited supplies, limited amounts of food," explained Chuikov.

Hitler still believed in victory

Hitler had followed the Germans' progress in October from a distance. General Friedrich Paulus's troops in the 6th Army held 90 percent of Stalingrad, and the Führer still expected the city to be captured before November. The Wehrmacht had now pushed all the way to the Volga, splitting Chuikov's 62nd Army into two isolated pockets, drained of resources, trying to hold out.

When Hitler gave a radio address in Munich on 8th November, he made sure to declare, in his usual bombastic style, that everything was going to plan. He explained that Stalingrad had not yet been completely captured for the simple reason that the Führer did not want to see casualties like those sustained during the savage World War I battle for the city of Verdun.

In fact, everyone knew that time was against Hitler's troops on the Stalingrad front. No one had forgotten how the Soviet winter of the previous year had exposed the German Army's weakness. Moreover, many German soldiers in the 6th Army had not had any leave since Operation Blue began on 28th June, and were now listening to the Führer's Munich speech, completely exhausted, with their fighting spirit in free fall. For them, the final fall of Stalingrad was far from just a formality.

In a message to General Paulus and his officers just a few days later, Hitler was a little more realistic, saying that he was aware of the difficulties in the battle for Stalingrad and of the soldiers' declining morale. However, the Führer believed that the Soviets' problems were even greater, and he expected that one final offensive would be enough for the Germans to secure the city.

Shortly before dawn on 11th November 1942, the Germans attacked again. This time, Hitler did everything in his power to crush the last resistance in Stalingrad and leave the rest of the warzone open.

"Hitler was obsessed with the symbolism of Stalingrad. To clean up the last few points of resistance in November, he ordered that even tank drivers should be assembled as infantry for a last push," reported Paulus's intelligence officer in Stalingrad, Winrich Behr.

But despite their desperate situation, the Soviets' willingness to sacrifice themselves remained unchanged. Each soldier continued to fight to the last drop of blood, stubbornly defending the last remnants of the industrial city that were still in the hands of the motherland. Once again, the Germans ran into a Soviet wall and the advance became the Germans' last in Stalingrad. The offensive was not only futile, but catastrophically worsened the situation for the soldiers of the 6th Army.

Hitler's decision to use tank crews as infantry turned out to be a strategic blunder of the highest order. Without armoured reserves, the rear of the 6th Army was exposed, with no possible means of counter-attack in case of a surprise assault. The German flanks were thus even weaker than they had been before.

Paulus now felt so pressured by the situation and Hitler's unrealistically high expectations that the general's doctor warned the 52-year-old army commander that he was heading for a breakdown.

It did not help Paulus's condition that the ice on the Volga became thick enough in several places for light sledges to haul supplies, food and ammunition across the river for Chuikov's troops. Although the Germans still held the vast majority of the city, Chuikov felt optimistic for his troops in Stalingrad. With the Volga frozen solid, supply lines could reopen, and the general also sensed that his superiors, Zhukov and Vasilevsky, were plotting something big:

"We had sensed that our high command was preparing a major attack, but we didn't know where exactly. … We'd been used to talking to people from front HQ every day, but now they'd all vanished," Chuikov revealed.

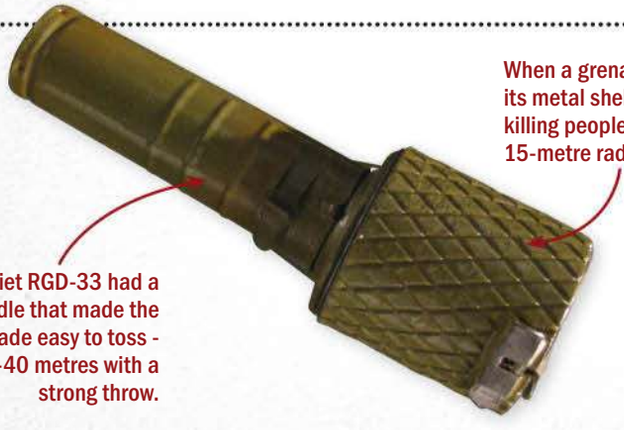
The leaders' plan was so top-secret that the Soviet commander of the Stalingrad front did not learn of it until a sustained thunder of artillery roared in the distance, early in the morning of 19th November. German soldiers of the 6th Army also heard the massive roar and were beside themselves with joy, assuming the sound was coming from their own auxiliaries. For a brief moment, they thought there was a chance that the fighting in the ruined city would be over before winter took hold. But they were sorely disappointed. The worst days of Stalingrad still lay ahead. ■

MEANWHILE

ENGLAND:
- Conscription is lowered to 18 years.

NORTHERN GERMANY:
- First V2 rocket launched.

SOLOMON ISLANDS:
- Guadalcanal naval battle begins.



When a grenade went off, its metal shell shattered, killing people within a 10-15-metre radius.

The Soviet RGD-33 had a handle that made the grenade easy to toss - 30-40 metres with a strong throw.



The city battles wore the German troops down *to lifeless shadows with thousand-yard stares painted on their faces.*

Stalingrad's citizens caught in crossfire

By Troels Ussing

On one side stood a tyrannical regime that refused to allow its inhabitants to leave their homes; on the other, an invading enemy that killed, raped and pillaged in the city's streets. In the midst of one of history's bloodiest battles, Stalingrad's citizens were forced to go about their daily lives.

What was the mood among civilians before the Germans bombed Stalingrad on 23rd August?

German planes began appearing in the skies over Stalingrad as early as July, but there were few bombings and no one in the city expected the terrible attack that began on 23rd August. Some Communist Party officials had been allowed to evacuate their families, and the sight of these people leaving the city set rumours buzzing and caused a little unrest. But overall, life in Stalingrad continued more or less normally: parents prepared their children for the new school year, people went to the cinema and the theatre, and Communist leaders assured the people that the Germans would never take the city.

Even after the bombardment of 23rd August, Stalin insisted on no mass evacuation, believing that it could lead to defeatism. Residents who tried to flee the city in panic were detained by the NKVD [Stalin's security force] at the ferry terminals. Others managed to escape across the Volga, either with or without the help of the local authorities. On 24th August, the city's defence committee ordered women and children evacuated to the hinterland, but this was done more to conserve the city's scarce food reserves than for humanitarian reasons.

How many civilians were left in Stalingrad when the Germans attacked in September?

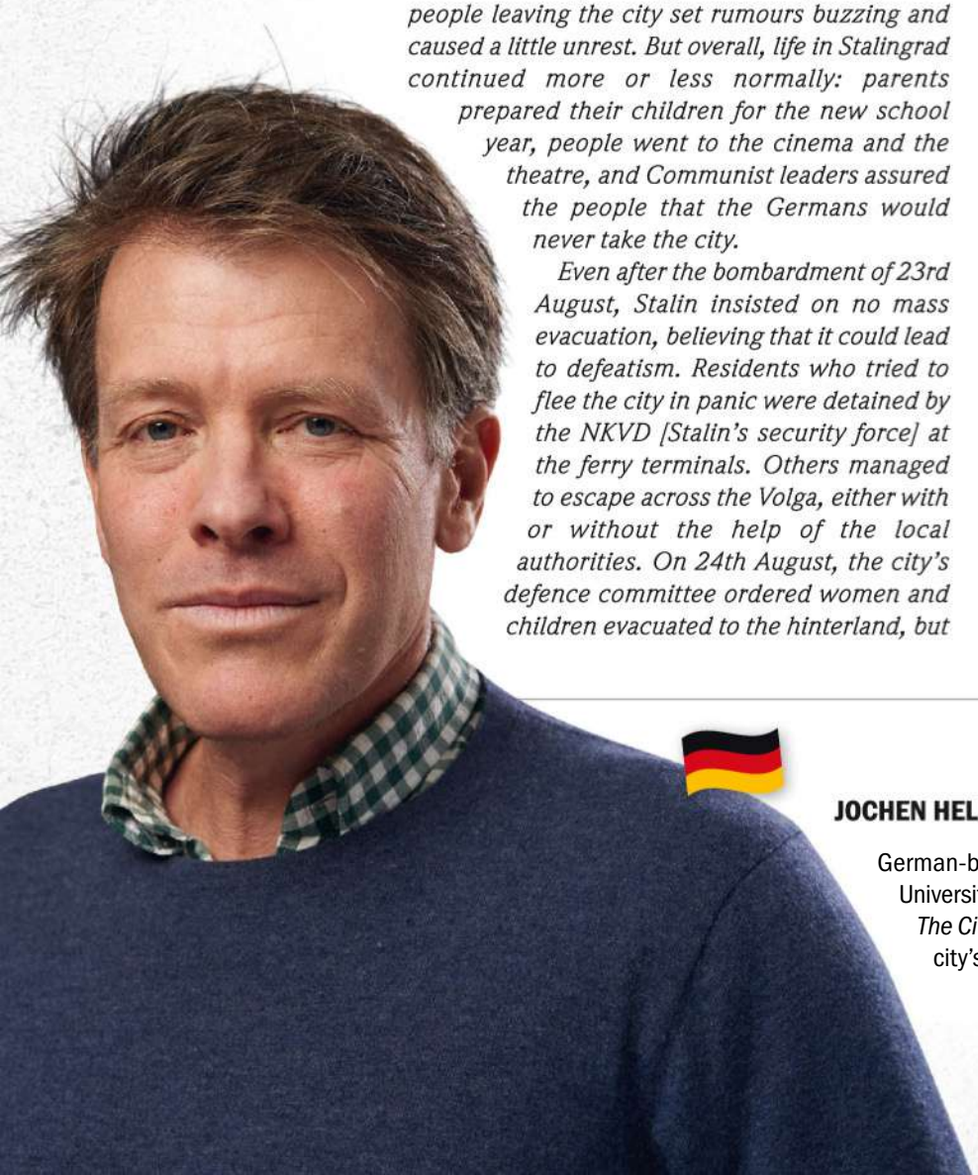
Around 150,000-200,000 inhabitants remained, while some 315,000 had been evacuated by 14th September, when the advancing Germans approached the city's central ferry terminal.

Why did some civilians choose to stay?

People were only allowed to leave Stalingrad if it benefited the war effort. So, working-class residents, for example, could not leave the city unless the factory they worked in was closed for production. Thus, some were refused permission to leave in time, but most of those who remained stayed in the city to care for sick family members, or because they didn't want to leave their homes as the cold winter approached.

How did the remaining citizens of the war-torn city survive?

It was extremely difficult to survive because many residents were caught between the front lines without adequate food or shelter. Shelling killed a



JOCHEN HELLBECK (born 1966)

German-born Jochen Hellbeck is a professor at Rutgers University, New Jersey, and the author of the book *Stalingrad: The City that Defeated the Third Reich,* which examines the city's significance for Soviet soldiers and its civilians.



Their homes were burned down, *so Stalingrad's citizens dug caves and ovens into the banks along the Volga River.*

lot of civilians. People – mostly the elderly, women and children – sought shelter in cellars, sheds, trench holes and sewage pipes.

We know very little about the horrors civilians endured in Stalingrad as the battle raged. One valuable source we have is a female cook named Agrafena Pozdnyakova, who gave an account just after the liberation of the industrial city. Her husband and two of her six children were killed by German bombs, but the rest of her family survived against all odds for almost six months.

What did the Germans do with the civilians in the city?

In order to exploit the population and guarantee the safety of their soldiers, the Germans set up military administration centres in the occupied part. The Germans required all citizens of the city to register at local military headquarters, and anyone who failed to produce a registration card risked being shot or sent to a concentration camp. Specialist staff from the 6th Army took charge of organising the evacuation of those inhabitants who could be economically exploited. Children under 14, men under 55-60 or so, and women up to 50 were sent to Germany, where they would be put to work.

From early October, the Germans gathered 8,000 to 10,000 citizens each morning and sent them on an 80-kilometre march – without food, water or shelter from the cold – to the nearest railway station at Kalach [west of Stalingrad].

How many civilians were left in Stalingrad after the Germans had captured the able-bodied population?

Because of the German evacuation, only around 15,000 civilians remained in the German-occupied areas when the Soviets began their counteroffensive in late November. The ▸

civilians' already dire situation deteriorated rapidly in the following weeks.

Since arriving in September, the Germans had been looting households for jewellery and other valuables, but in December soldiers began raiding sheds and huts for food and clothing. Cold, hungry and frustrated, the occupiers intensified their violent attacks on civilians. As the 6th Army retreated from the steppes, officers and soldiers took lodgings in undamaged dwellings and threw the civilian inhabitants on to the streets. Women were raped, too.

What happened when the Soviet army retook Stalingrad?

The Red Army reported that 7,655 surviving civilians were in the rubble when Soviet soldiers liberated the city. When the clean-up began, they discovered mass graves filled with civilian victims shot or hanged by the German occupiers.

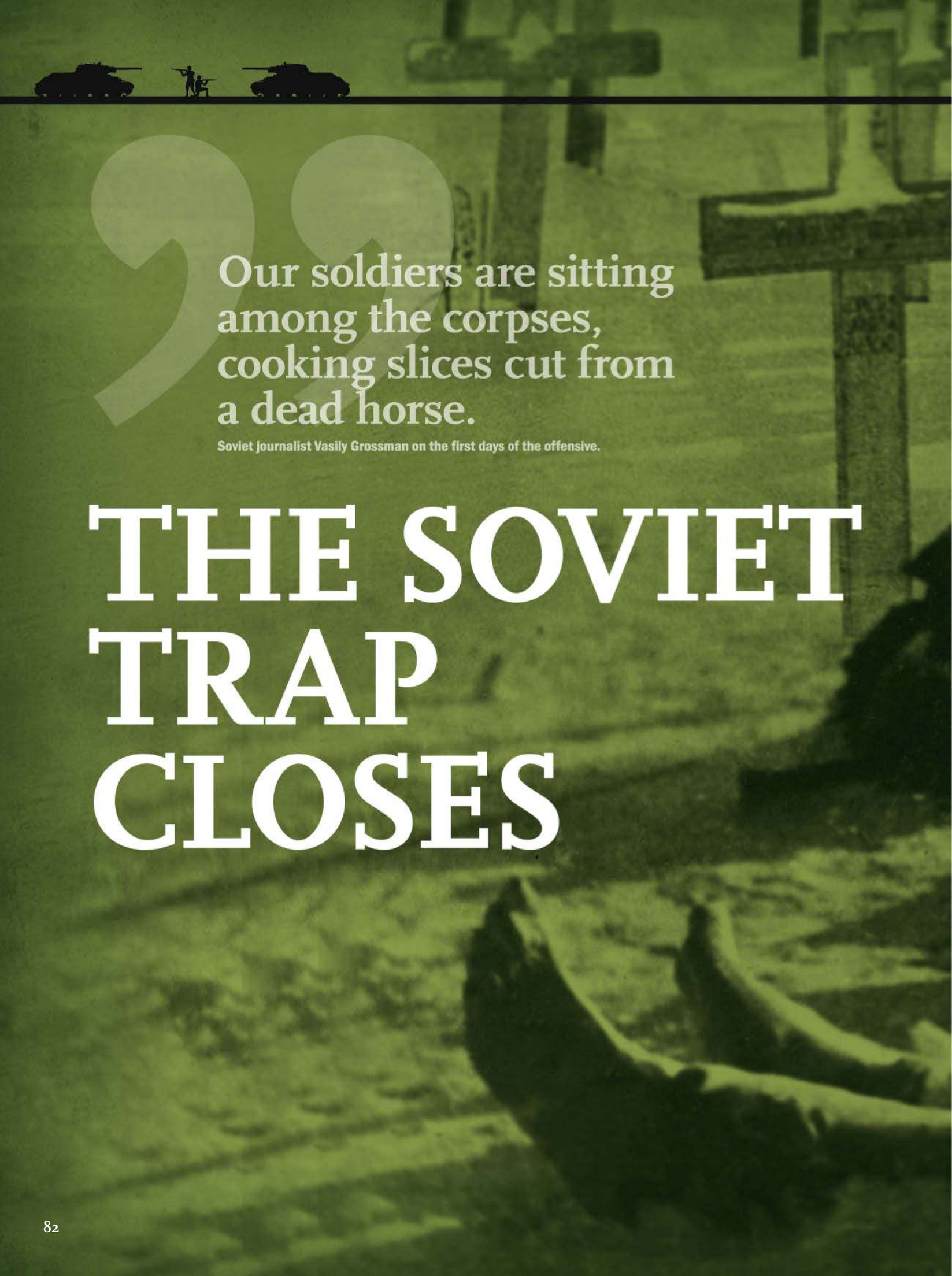
It's difficult to imagine the traumatic memories the surviving civilians must have been left with. One eyewitness, a municipal worker who returned to the devastated town after being evacuated, described what she saw in February 1943: "We were walking around our liberated district, along little paths among the mines, and encountered people who had lost their memory, who were afraid of the sound of their own voice. You would look at such a person – a boy's figure, but the temples are completely white." ■



German bombing raids *reduced Stalingrad's suburbs to ruins. Houses were built of wood, easily ignited by incendiary bombs.*



Soviet prisoners of war ***survived by eating horses as supplies on the Eastern Front became scarce in 1942.***



> Our soldiers are sitting among the corpses, cooking slices cut from a dead horse.
>
> Soviet journalist Vasily Grossman on the first days of the offensive.

THE SOVIET TRAP CLOSES

Stalingrad, autumn/winter 1942



Ice-covered bodies piled up *around Stalingrad after the ground froze like concrete. The decisive phase of the battle cost thousands of lives.*

The Soviet trap closes

For months, Soviet commanders readied a bold counter-offensive, Operation Uranus. Under cover of night, a million fresh soldiers prepared to give the Germans in Stalingrad a dose of their own medicine. With one fell swoop, the Red Army would encircle the German 6th Army and halt the Nazi advance once and for all.

By Troels Ussing

Dense white frost covered the front 150 kilometres north-west of Stalingrad. According to Soviet Lieutenant General Georgy Rodin, the fog was *"thick as milk"*, and in the early hours of 19th November 1942, snow also started to fall heavily from the sky. Ice crystals crunched under the boots of Red Army artillerymen as they loaded the 3,500 heavy guns and batteries set up along the front – 50 for every kilometre. Now the artillerymen just had to wait for the signal to fire.

At 07.30, trumpets blared out the signal at full volume across the terrain. Operation Uranus was under way.

"Fire!" yelled the artillerymen, and seconds later thousands of shells hurtled towards the enemy's positions. Through the fog, the rockets of the dreaded Stalin Organs whined and exploded like meteorites. The shells tore up the frozen earth, and no-man's land, where the snow had fallen silently hours before, was transformed into a moonscape. Even for the battle-hardened German armoured troops tasked with covering the northern flank of the Stalingrad Front with the 3rd Romanian Army, the Red Army's 80-minute opening bombardment felt monstrous. Tank driver Henry Metelmann knew the bombing was a foretaste of something far worse:

"The whole place trembled, bits of earth fell on to us and the noise was deafening… Everything was in utter turmoil and I heard much shouting and crying from the Romanian forward line… Then we heard the heavy clanging of tracks. Someone further along quite unnecessarily shouted: 'They are coming!' And then we saw the first of them crawling out of the greyness, an ugly, frightening sight."

The darkness continued to mask the first of over one million Soviet soldiers who'd been secretly transported to the front. The colossal force was driven by hatred and a thirst for revenge after the months-long German attack on Stalingrad, which had taken



such a huge toll on both the Red Army and the city's civilian population.

"The long-awaited hour had come when the defenders of Stalingrad would make the enemy's blood flow for the blood of our wives, children, soldiers and officers," said a political officer on the front. As winter descended on Stalingrad, it was time to swap roles. It was time for retribution.

Marshal screened huge attack

Weeks before the German panzer crews and their Axis comrades saw the Red menace approaching in the dark, top Soviet General Georgy Zhukov had coordinated the final details of Operation Uranus. The marshal had followed the autumn's developments with grim satisfaction, in which he and Chief of Staff Aleksandr Vasilevsky had deployed General Vasily Chuikov's 62nd Army as bait in a huge trap. Hitler had been hooked as easily as a hungry fish. Although Chuikov's soldiers in Stalingrad paid a heavy price, and the troops at times were on the verge of losing their fingertip hold on the city, they'd heroically held out to make life miserable for the enemy. Even in early November, before his major counter-offensive, Zhukov sensed that momentum was about to tip to the Soviet side.

"By this time the enemy had been reduced to almost total exhaustion. From the interrogation of prisoners it was established that their units and formations were a long way below strength, the moral and political mood of officers as well as men had slumped and few of them believed they would survive these hellish months of fighting," the general wrote after the war.

In the run-up to 19th November, when Operation Uranus was launched, Zhukov was kept busy hiding his major counter-offensive from view. The Red Army would attack both north and south of Stalingrad to trap the remnants of the German 6th Army in a huge pincer movement. But moving a million soldiers, plus up to 1,000 tanks, 13,450 guns and 1,000 fighter planes without the enemy suspecting would prove a huge challenge. It took every inch of the Soviets' skill for *maskirovka* (disguise) to camouflage their movements while deliberately misleading the enemy.

In the weeks leading up to the attack, tanks and self-propelled guns lurched towards the front under ▸



The Red Army's winter uniform was far more effective than that of the Germans.

A padded jacket, the Telogreika, kept Soviet soldiers warm in sub-zero temperatures.



Trenches offered the best defence *on the bare plains, like here at Toropets, north of Stalingrad. Tanks were also dug in.*



Georgy Zhukov at the front *prior to the big Soviet counter-offensive. The general – soon to be marshal – had previously organised the defence of both Leningrad and Moscow.*

cover of darkness, accompanied by thousands of trains and trucks crammed with soldiers, ammunition boxes and cans of food. When daylight broke, the soldiers hid themselves and their equipment in small villages and under camouflage. In addition, the smoke of concealment hung over the final phase of the advance, when German troops and aircraft could more easily detect danger.

The secrecy was so complete that no soldier in the Red Army knew an encirclement was coming. The soldiers in the north knew only that they would attack on 19th November, while the soldiers in the south were told they would storm forward the next day. The secrecy would prove immaterial if the cover-up hadn't worked. But it had.

"We had absolutely no idea about the strength of the Russian troops in the area. There had been nothing here earlier, and suddenly an attack of great force was made, which was decisive," said German General Alfred Jodl. Senior German officers had anticipated an imminent attack on the vulnerable Romanian flanks, but they had no idea where it would originate. Moreover, Hitler based his decisions on the assumption that the Soviet reserves had been depleted. But now Stalin's fresh, battle-ready army of millions was ready to attack. The steppes west of Stalingrad would once again flow with blood.

Flanks ripped open by first thrust

At 08.40 on 19th November, after initial bombing raids had ploughed up the rocky terrain, Soviet tanks rolled on to the front's northern sectors, lurching towards the Romanian positions.

The 3rd Romanian Army's troops were part of the Axis forces tasked with defending the flanks of the German 6th Army. Poorly equipped and clothed, none of the Romanians were enthusiastic about fighting in the Russian cold for Hitler's cause. Liaison officer Gerhard Stöck, attached to a Romanian corps in the east of the Kletskaya sector, sensed their unease. The ardent Nazi and former Olympic javelin gold medallist shared his concern when, during the Soviets' initial bombardment, he called the 6th Army's headquarters in Golubinskaya, situated on the right bank of the River Don.

"I have the impression that the Romanians will not be able to resist, but I will keep you informed," Stöck commented.

He was right. In the Kletskaya sector, Red Army tanks rumbled forward with infantrymen perched on their rear armour. From here they jumped off to launch wave after wave of attack on the enemy's positions – a tactic that cost many lives but ensured swift progress. In just an hour and a half, the armoured forces advanced five kilometres. Artilleryman Petr Zhulyev followed in their wake, revelling in the chaos and destruction:

"More and more often we came across Romanian soldiers with white flags. They were a laughable sight... They were like one big gypsy caravan, and their uniforms were a strange mish-mash: battered sheepskin hats, all sorts of rags around their necks and on their feet. They weren't enjoying the Russian frosts," he said.

Even the more experienced and better-equipped German panzer troops who supported the Romanians found themselves more concerned with saving their own lives than defending the front as enemy tanks appeared in the morning fog.

"We saw the first of them crawling out of the greyness, an ugly, frightening sight. They had their headlights full on, and from between them their guns were blazing. It was impossible to how many there were, but ... I knew instantly that the game was up, that there was nothing to do anymore but to dive for cover," recalled Henry Metelmann. By the afternoon, the Soviets had pushed 25-30 kilometres across enemy lines. At times, the advance was so swift across the snow-covered plains that Petr Zhulyev and his advancing artillery battery didn't have time to spot the enemy until they were almost on them:

"There was a monotonous white nothing every way you looked. We somehow went past our own guard post and didn't even notice when we crossed the little Chervlenaya river. Completely unexpectedly we came upon a sentry who must have been half-asleep or half-frozen, because too ▸

STRENGTH RATIO

During Operation Uranus, **the Soviets attacked with**

728

tanks against some

164

obsolete Romanian and German tanks. Many were incapacitated because mice had chewed through their electrical wires.

Stalin Organs played a symphony of death

The Red Army rained rockets from its Katyusha batteries, which could fire 4.35 tonnes of explosives at an area the size of four football pitches in an instant. But the rockets' most devastating effect was psychological.

The sound of the rocket engines and the tight launch rails, which resembled the pipes of a church organ, prompted the Germans to nickname the Soviet BM-13 rocket launcher *Stalinorgel* (Stalin Organ). The terrifying sound was practically the weapon's strongest card. Every time the Soviets fired a BM-13, the Germans cowered in fear.

The Red Army, however, loved the BM-13's noise and renamed it Katyusha after a popular Soviet song about a girl who misses her soldier boyfriend. Infantryman Mikhail Alexeyev was particularly impressed:

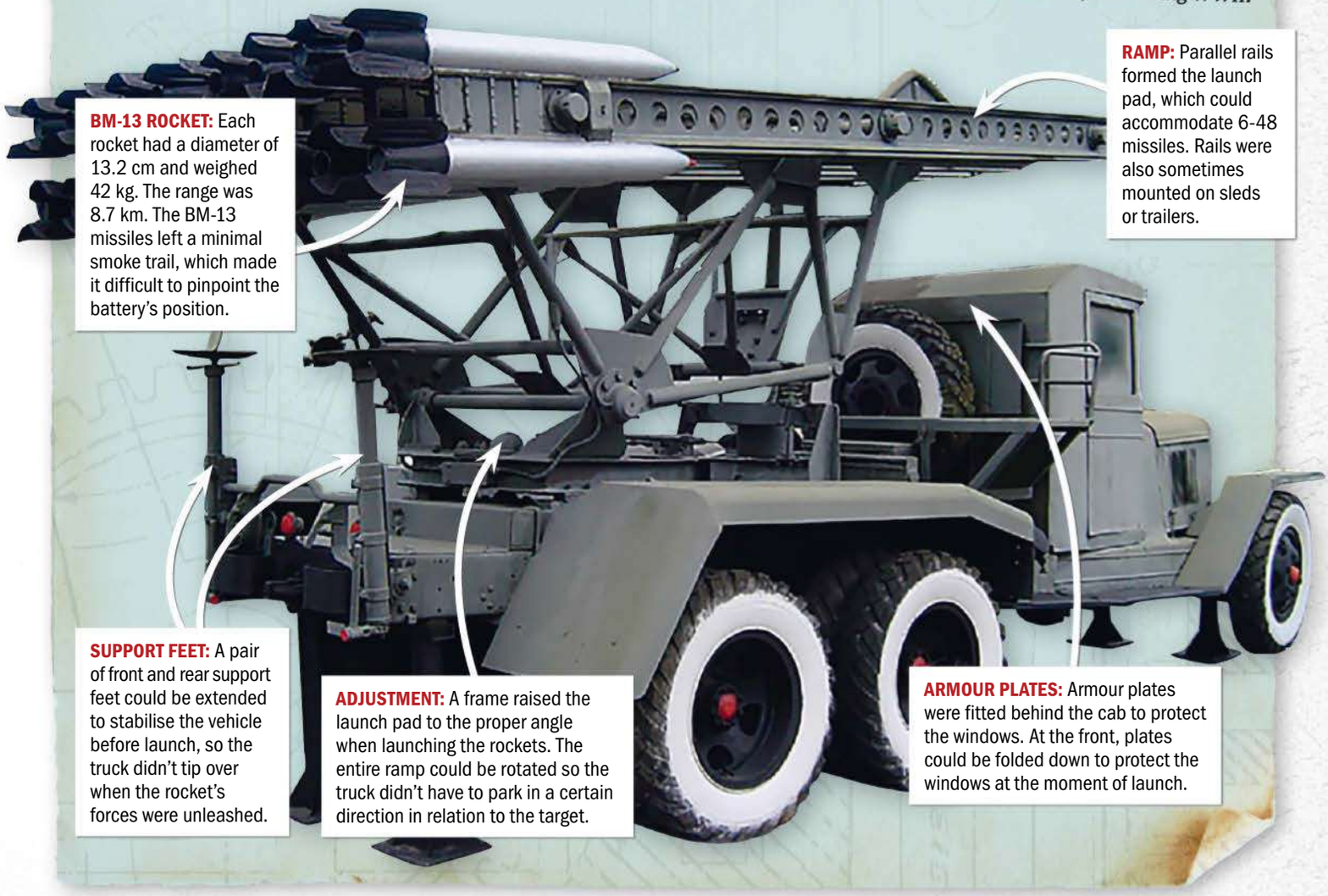
"I had heard about the Katyushas, but never seen them in action. And so when I heard that hideous screech and hiss coming from somewhere behind me I couldn't help hunching down... Then we saw something no less terrifying ahead of us: a line of flaming tornadoes, a good half a kilometre wide. It seemed that the village of Abganerovo itself was hopping around in some kind of mad, demented dance [of] the rockets exploding."

Although the BM-13 rocket launcher was no as accurate a piece of artillery as a gun, it was a fiendishly effective weapon for the Red Army because of its high manoeuvrability and ability to carpet bomb a target.

A Katyusha battery typically comprised four trucks with mounted launch pads, and the vehicles' combined missile salvo could carpet bomb an area of 28,000 square metres, the equivalent of four football pitches. The missiles could be fired in 7-10 seconds, and before the enemy had time to assess where the missiles were coming from, the trucks had moved on to take up new positions.



Rocket launchers blasted out *of Soviet factories, which built 10,000 during WWII.*



BM-13 ROCKET: Each rocket had a diameter of 13.2 cm and weighed 42 kg. The range was 8.7 km. The BM-13 missiles left a minimal smoke trail, which made it difficult to pinpoint the battery's position.

RAMP: Parallel rails formed the launch pad, which could accommodate 6-48 missiles. Rails were also sometimes mounted on sleds or trailers.

SUPPORT FEET: A pair of front and rear support feet could be extended to stabilise the vehicle before launch, so the truck didn't tip over when the rocket's forces were unleashed.

ADJUSTMENT: A frame raised the launch pad to the proper angle when launching the rockets. The entire ramp could be rotated so the truck didn't have to park in a certain direction in relation to the target.

ARMOUR PLATES: Armour plates were fitted behind the cab to protect the windows. At the front, plates could be folded down to protect the windows at the moment of launch.

I feel much better because we have started to destroy Germans. This was the moment when we began to beat the snakes. ■ Soldier Dmitry Venkutov on the Soviet advance.

late he shouted out in German 'Halt'. I instantly jumped out of the cabin and shoulder-barged him as I hit the ground. He went headfirst into a dugout. I tossed a few grenades behind him."

Fronts stormed towards the same goal

The first day of the counter-offensive was disastrous for German army command. While it was caught up trying to formulate a plan of retaliation on the northern flank, the Red Army struck again in the south. On the southern front, General Andrey Yeremenko led an attack on the largely unmotorised Romanian 4th Army, which possessed almost nothing other than obsolete guns. The morning of 20th November was also plagued by bad weather, as Yeremenko stood ready in an observation post to follow the advance through binoculars:

"The fog was still thick, and visibility was nowhere more than 200 metres... Everybody was nervously awaiting the signal. The infantry were hugging the ground, ready to go in... From somewhere behind us came the growl of tanks as their engines were warmed up.

"Then the fog started to lift and scatter. Visibility was approaching normal. At 09.30 the order was given to start the barrage at ten... The Katyushas played their music first. Then the artillery and the mortars began their noisy work. It is hard to express in words what one feels listening to the many-voiced choir of an artillery cannonade before the start of an offensive. But what one feels above all is pride in the might of one's homeland and faith in victory.

"Right before the attack we let off the powerful M-30 mortars. That was the signal. Out of their foxholes rose the endless lines of our soldiers. I could hear the long, continuous cries of 'hurrah!', and the workmanlike clatter of the tanks... Twenty minutes into the attack they had already reached the second line of trenches and were starting to disappear beyond the horizon."

The Red Army now thundered forward on two fronts. Both northern and southern forces had the same target: the town of Kalach, situated on the Don between the attacking armies. Here the ring had to be closed behind the German 6th Army, which fought on obliviously inside the ruins of Stalingrad. Its commander, General Friedrich Paulus, remained unaware, as did the Soviet forces; only Stalin and a handful of top generals knew the daring plan.

Noose tightened around Germans

Soviet war correspondent Vasily Grossman joined the rearguard of the IV Cavalry Corps as it followed behind the northern flank towards Kalach. Grossman noted that *"the brown winter steppe has turned* ▸

German commanders watch the front at *Stalingrad through binoculars, unaware of the unfolding Soviet counter-offensive.*



Pincer manoeuvre trapped German troops in Stalingrad

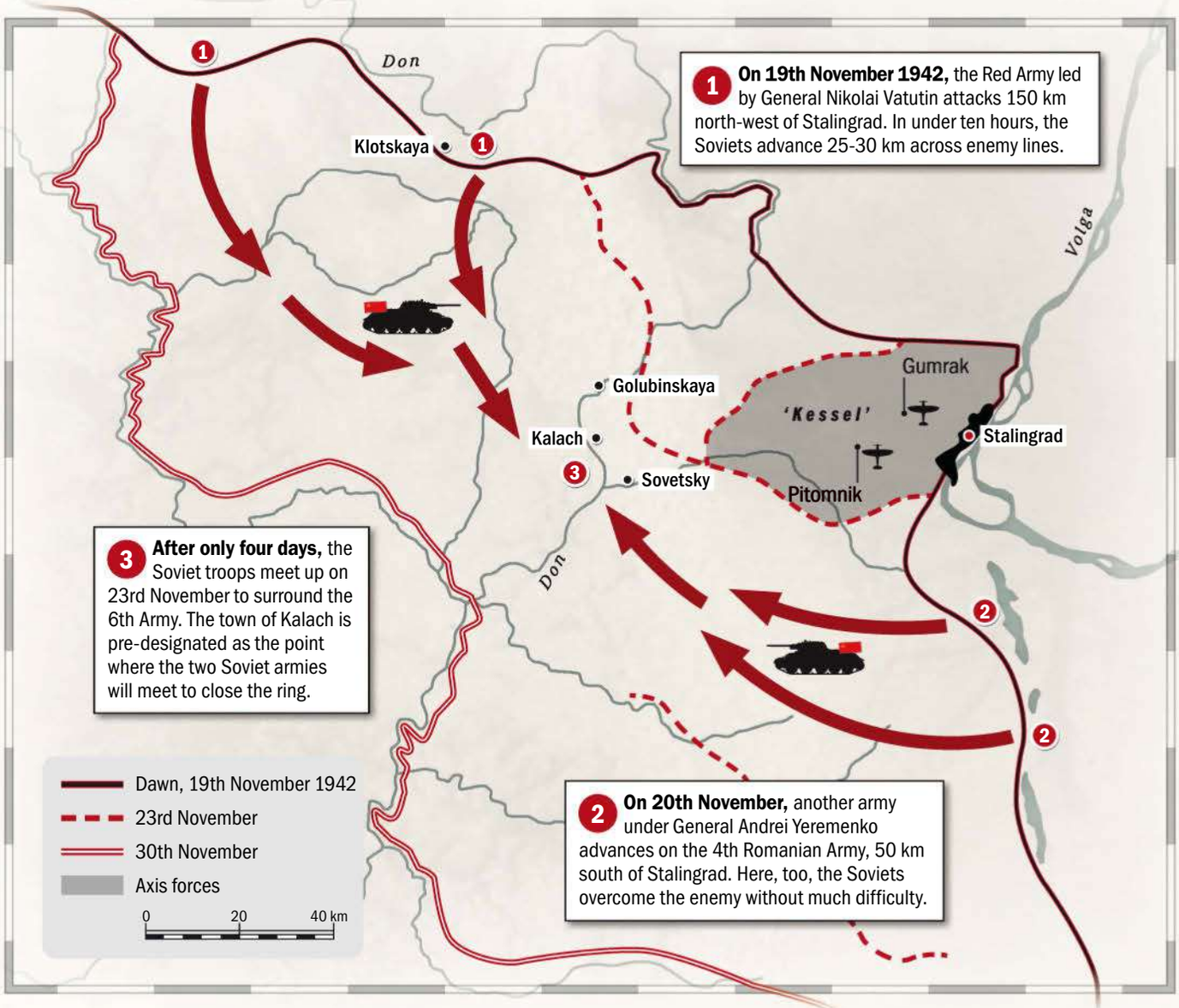


In just four days, the Red Army exploited the enemy's weak flanks on the Stalingrad front to carry out one of the world's greatest pincer manoeuvres. As the pincer closed around General Friedrich Paulus's 6th Army, some 280,000 Axis troops were left trapped inside the area the Germans called *kessel* (cauldron). The operation changed the course of the battle.

Soviet generals Zhukov and Vasilevsky were the brains behind the bold and ambitious Operation Uranus. While the strongest German troops fought inside the ruins of Stalingrad, the Soviets attacked north and south of the city, where Hitler had deployed less experienced soldiers from Romania, Hungary and Italy. The forces had nowhere near the training, equipment and fighting spirit of the Germans. Stalin initially wanted to focus the attack closer to Stalingrad, but Zhukov and Vasilevsky convinced him that a large-scale attack further behind the front could better crush the enemy. By attacking in a large circle around the core of the battle, the Soviets deprived the Germans of the opportunity to launch a counter-attack, because the bulk of the 6th Army was tied up fighting in the city, far from the shock troops.



250,000 German bodies *were discovered after the Battle of Stalingrad.*



I know the 6th Army and your commander-in-chief and have no doubt that in this difficult situation it will hold on bravely. ■ Adolf Hitler refuses to evacuate his troops.

brick red from blood". Dead soldiers lay everywhere, barely noticed by the advancing Red Army.

"There is a flattened Romanian. A tank has driven over him. His face has become a bas-relief. Next to him, there are two crushed Germans. There is one of our soldiers, too, lying in the trench half buried. Empty cans, grenades, hand grenades, a blanket stained with blood, pages from German magazines. Our soldiers are sitting among the corpses, cooking in a cauldron slices cut from a dead horse, and stretching their frozen hands towards the fire," wrote the correspondent, full of admiration for the Soviet army's mood in spite of its desolate surroundings:

"The faces of Red Army soldiers have become bronze red from the severe winter winds. It isn't easy to fight in this kind of weather, to spend long winter nights out in the steppe under this icy wind that penetrates everywhere, yet the men are marching cheerfully. This is the Stalingrad advance. The army is in exceptionally high spirits."

The elevated mood and optimism could also be seen in the soldiers' letters home, where Germans and Romanians were collectively described as snakes:

"I feel much better because we have started to destroy Germans. This was the moment when we began to beat the snakes. We are capturing plenty. We hardly have time to pass them on back to prison camps. Now they are starting to pay for our blood, and for the tears of our people, for insults and for robbery. I received winter uniform so don't worry about me. Things go well here," wrote soldier Dmitry Venkutov to his wife.

The Red Army quickly captured 27,000 Romanian prisoners, whom Grossman saw moving *"on and on in crowds"* as the rearguard advanced. Where Henry Metelmann was fighting, however, the Soviets were taking no prisoners, so the 20-year-old survived by hiding. When he finally ventured out, Metelmann could think only of escaping death or captivity.

"I heard some wailing and following the sound, pistol in hand, I came to a number of dead Romanians and Germans – but no Russians – lying all over the place in a hollow… Having never had any medical training, and without bandages or cotton, said nothing to any of them [but] quickly turned and walked away from it all… I knew that if I stayed, I would be drained of all my strength," said Metelmann, who fled west, barely escaping the Soviet iron ring that was closing around the Germans.

Günter Toepke was stationed at Pitomnik airfield, 20 kilometres west of Stalingrad. The 6th Army quartermaster managed the distribution of supplies in the German-occupied hinterland. As he headed south-



Motorcycles carried wounded *and orders around the Soviet hinterland. The iconic M70 model was first used at Stalingrad.*

east out of Kalach on the afternoon of 22nd November, the Soviets were still north of the town, so Toepke felt secure until he got wind of the enemy's plans.

"I bounced along in my car, heading east over a dull tract of steppeland. Suddenly some of our soldiers jumped out of a bush and frantically waved me down. They asked me where I had come from. And then they told me: 'Four Russian tanks came up that road a quarter of an hour ago.'" Toepke couldn't believe it: *"You've been seeing ghosts,"* he retorted. *"How could there be Russian tanks here? There might be some up in the north, on the other bank of the Don, but surely not here in the south?"*

And then realisation dawned: *"Damn it all, it looked like the Russians were attempting a large-scale pincer movement to box the 6th Army into Stalingrad. Kalach was the meeting point."*

Toepke wasted no time: *"That same night I telephoned my divisional commander and told him of my concerns. The divisions inside Stalingrad had no idea of what was going on, of what was being played out deep in their rear."*

The following night the trap was sprung. Barely four days after launching Operation Uranus, Lieutenant General Rodin closed in on Kalach with his 26th Tank Corps. Rodin sent in Colonel Grigory Filippov with an armoured brigade to take the bridge at Kalach, which crossed the Don. Filippov later recounted its capture:

"We were left with five tanks, an armoured car with a communications officer, and five trucks of a motorised brigade carrying 50 or so soldiers... A little further on and we were close enough to see the guards on the bridge. We got quite close before we stopped... The thought popped into my head: they are not ready for a battle. We drove on to the bridge. The Germans did not sound the alarm until we got to the left bank. There was a short skirmish, and the guards were dead."

The troops had covered more than 100 kilometres, and at 10.30 the following day – 23rd November – the Soviet units from the north met up with Yeremenko's troops from the south in Sovetsky, a village south-east of Kalach. The encirclement was complete.

Hitler refused withdrawal

Axis forces were caught inside the pincer, surrounded by Soviet forces. Their commander, General Paulus, narrowly escaped capture when, on 21st November, he stood in his headquarters in Golubinskaya, north of Kalach. At the last minute, he received a message that Soviet tanks were close. Along with his chief of staff, Arthur Schmidt, the general managed to ▸



Vodka was distributed to Soviet soldiers as part of their field ration.

One of the purposes of the alcohol was to warm the soldiers in the trenches.



Lice and dirt weakened soldiers

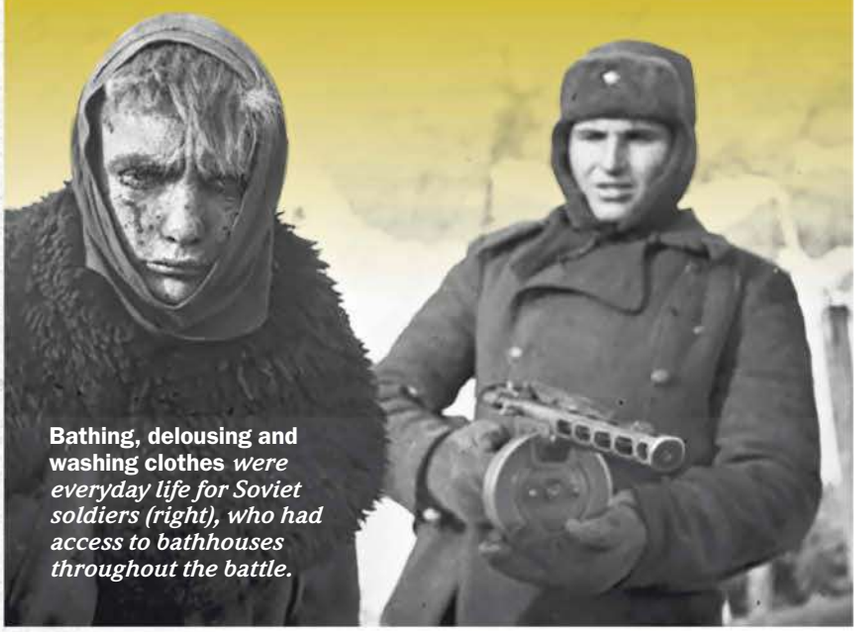
Disease spread like steppe fires among the German soldiers, who lived like animals in the barren plains and ruinous heaps of Stalingrad under miserable hygienic conditions.

Dirty men, huddled together for days in trench holes and bunkers, quickly crumbled in Stalingrad. Hypothermia and a lack of food and nutrients wore down the soldiers' immune systems, leaving them unable to fight off infectious diseases such as hepatitis and dysentery.

The poor sanitary conditions worsened the situation. The troops rarely had the opportunity to wash themselves and their uniforms properly, because firewood to thaw snow and heat water was in short supply. Instead, the army lived in each other's dirt, while lice crawled everywhere. A German corporal described the infestation:

"Every day we become more infested with lice. Lice are like the Russians. You kill one, ten new ones appear in its place." Lice transmitted diseases like typhus between the close-knit men and made the skin itch, so the soldiers' constant scratching opened wounds that risked being infected.

In bunkers and cellars, soldiers couldn't dig latrines, so they often squatted over a shovel and did their best to flush the faeces out of the nearest hole. Underground, disease ran rampant among the emaciated soldiers.



Bathing, delousing and washing clothes *were everyday life for Soviet soldiers (right), who had access to bathhouses throughout the battle.*

escape in two Fieseler Storch aircraft. It was at this point that the Soviet plan finally became evident to German high command: the Red Army was in the process of turning Stalingrad into what the Germans called *Kesselschlacht* (cauldron battle), in which a force was surrounded and hemmed in on all sides.

Despite this, on the evening of 22nd November, half a day before the ring closed completely, Hitler refused to let Paulus attempt a breakout, even though it might have saved the majority of the 280,000 soldiers about to be cut off.

"I know the 6th Army and your commander-in-chief and have no doubt that in this difficult situation it will hold on bravely," was Hitler's curt reply. He would rather have sacrificed Paulus's entire force than suffer a great loss of prestige.

Paulus, who usually obeyed without hesitation, was so concerned he resisted. The following day, the general sent a further plea to Hitler from his new headquarters near Gumrak Airfield, 15 km from Stalingrad: *"Since the receipt of your wireless message on the evening of the 22nd November, the situation has developed rapidly… Ammunition and fuel are almost exhausted. Countless batteries and anti-tank units have fired all their shells. Timely and adequate receipt of supplies is no longer possible… This necessitates the immediate withdrawal of all the divisions now in Stalingrad."*

When General Kurt Zeitzler, Chief of the General Staff of the German Army High Command, read Paulus's distress call from Stalingrad, he agreed with his request. The chief of staff immediately attempted to persuade Hitler to heed Paulus's pleas when the Führer arrived at the Wolf's Lair in Poland on the night of 24th November.

Hitler was flabbergasted – would Zeitzler give up Stalingrad? Yes, the general answered, trying – in vain – to convince the dictator that Stalingrad was by no means the *"fortress"* that Hitler described it as. But the general's efforts were in vain.

"I won't leave the Volga! I won't go back from the Volga!" the Führer yelled, hammering his fist into the table. The fate of the 6th Army was sealed.

Airbridge to supply the 6th Army

Hitler had other ideas on how the besieged troops would hold out. Using an airbridge, the Luftwaffe would fly supplies to the stricken soldiers so they could continue fighting the enemy in the ruined city until German forces from the south could force their way through the Russian encirclement and create a gap to the 6th Army.

"The army can trust me to do everything necessary to ensure supplies and rapidly break the encirclement," Hitler promised.

The airlift would be Paulus's lifeline, just as the Volga had supplied Chuikov for months. But if the 250,000-plus Axis soldiers were to be equipped to fight on in Stalingrad's streets, it would require a minimum daily delivery of 550 tonnes of fuel, munitions and food. Colonel General Wolfram von Richthofen was put in charge of the air fleet at Stalingrad. He estimated that his planes could deliver a maximum of 350 tonnes a day, and then only for a short period because the air force would lose many planes during the transport flights. However, the



Kalach was in ruins *when the Soviets stormed in. In the ten days before the Battle of Stalingrad, a fierce fight for the riverside town unfolded.*

Luftwaffe's supreme commander, Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring, took a different view.

"My Fuhrer! I assure you that the Luftwaffe can keep the 6th Army supplied," the enthusiastic Göring claimed in his usual bombastic fashion at a meeting with Hitler and Zeitzler on 27th November.

"That is a lie," retorted Zeitzler, who had carefully examined the reports from Stalingrad. The encircled force had access to few airfields, and even if the Luftwaffe used all its planes from France, North Africa and the rest of the Soviet Union, it could barely meet the needs of the 6th Army. But Zeitzler knew the Führer would welcome Göring's guarantee.

"The Reich-Marshal has made his report to me, which I have no choice but to believe," Hitler stated. He refused to reverse his decision, even though only 350 tonnes were shipped to the 6th Army in the first week.

The airbridge's obvious shortcomings placed further pressure on the troops that Hitler had designated to break through the Soviet forces from the south to create an opening in the *kessel* (cauldron), as the Germans referred to the encircled area of Stalingrad. Through this narrow corridor, the 6th Army could then be reinforced and receive essential supplies.

Field Marshal Erich von Manstein was placed in charge of Operation Winter Storm, which he launched on 12th December. During the offensive's first days, Manstein rapidly gained ground, news of which was welcome to the soldiers trapped in the cauldron, who expressed their delight that *"Der Manstein kommt"* (Manstein is coming).

"The worst is over for the moment. We're all hoping to be out of the cauldron by Christmas," wrote one German infantryman in a letter home to his parents on 14th December. With 50,000 soldiers and 200 tanks, Manstein's force continued its rapid advance. But 50 kilometres from the Stalingrad cauldron, the advance stalled. After General ▸



Soviets smoked a type of cigarette called papirosa with a cardboard mouthpiece.

Herzegovina Flor was Stalin's favourite and therefore also loved by the Soviets.

Zhukov launched an attack on 16th December that threatened to encircle Manstein's relief force, the rescue operation was halted and the experienced Manstein began to retreat. As winter set in, the 6th Army had finally been left to its own devices.

Volga froze solid like concrete

With the Germans' plans failing, the Soviets finally saw the situation falling in their favour. By mid-November, the Volga had begun to freeze over and relatively light sleds could traverse the ice. But a rise in temperature in the latter half of November left Chuikov frowning, as the Volga once again became a mushy mass of water and ice. In December, however, the freezing temperatures reached minus 30, to the delight of all the Soviets in Stalingrad, as the ice on the Volga had now become as hard as concrete.

"Yesterday and today winter really started here. Good frosts," wrote one soldier on 18th December.

The soldiers placed branches on the ice and poured water over them, which quickly froze around the branches to form a clearer and more slip-resistant path. Trucks began to shuttle across the river, carrying weapons, ammunition and food in one direction, while ferrying the wounded in the other.

The harsh frost, on the other hand, tormented the cut-off German and Romanian troops, who trudged across the plains in December to reach Stalingrad itself. The Red Army didn't bother pursuing them. Instead, the Soviets consolidated the ring around the cauldron to establish a solid front line. Nevertheless, the Germans' road to Stalingrad was still a torturous one.

"We have no winter clothes. There are five pairs of ersatz valenki per company—great big straw boots on wooden soles. They do not warm the feet and are almost impossible for walking. We have been swindled, and have been condemned to death; we shall die of the war or of frost," wrote Walz Gunther in one letter, while another recorded his suffering day by day in his diary:

"Again we march, again no water. Can't get anything to drink. I feel terrible. I've been eating snow. Tonight we didn't find any quarters. It's snowing, I'm completely soaked, water in my boots… We cooked up a little horsemeat in snow water," the unknown diarist reported.

Two days later, he reached Stalingrad with comrades from the 305th Infantry Division: *"It keeps getting worse. So much snow, my toes are frostbitten. I am so hungry. This evening after a long march we entered Stalingrad. We were welcomed by exploding shells. We ended up in a cellar. Thirty of us. Absolutely filthy, unshaved. We can barely move. There's very little to eat. Three or four cigarettes. A dreadful, savage group of men. I am so unhappy! All is lost."*

Other refugees from the steppes also hoped to sate their hunger in Stalingrad, but they were sorely disappointed. The airlift had functioned so poorly that the bread ration was never more than 200 grams a day. To survive, the Germans slaughtered their draft horses. Often, however, the animals died of starvation themselves, and the soldiers were spared killing them. On the other hand, the dead animals were so frozen that only the engineers could cut them open with their saws.

"Slowly, our brave fighters are starting to become decrepit," noted a field medic who watched as the 6th Army's soldiers shrivelled from lack of food.

The German generals lashed out at Göring, whose promises had been shown to be totally unrealistic. Richthofen had had enough. Manstein and Zeitzler had told him that Göring had reportedly claimed the supply situation wasn't that bad.

"Apart from the fact that it would do his figure a power of good to spend a little time in the Kessel, I can only assume that my reports either are not read or are given no credence," Richthofen noted bitterly in his diary on 19th December, having previously written one week earlier that *"my trust in our leadership has rapidly sunk below zero"*.

In solidarity with the soldiers at Stalingrad, Zeitzler expressed his discontent by cutting his food intake to match the 6th Army's meagre rations. He lost 12 kilograms over 14 days until Hitler ordered him to eat normally again.

A melancholic Christmas

Although the soldiers of the 6th Army were on the verge of starvation, they still made sure to put a little extra aside in the week before Christmas. The men knew the holiday could be their last. Every day comrades fell, and Chuikov's troops constantly harassed with grenades and storm attacks, denying the Germans rest and sleep. They no longer bade each other goodnight as they lay in the cold cellars, but instead wished each other a *"quiet night"*.

Stille Nacht (Silent Night) was also what the German soldiers fervently hoped for on 24th ▸

FACTS

Romania's poor defences were largely down to **outdated equipment and artillery, coupled with a lack of troops.** Also, the Germans ignored Romanian pleas to slow down the Red Army by blowing up bridges.



After many died in the cold, the Red Army introduced the ushanka fur cap.

The cap was made of wool with a layer of fur underneath, typically sheep or mink.



Firewood became increasingly scarce *as the siege dragged on. The uniforms of the German troops were not designed for the cold of Stalingrad.*

COMMAND TO THE 6TH ARMY | 27th November 1942

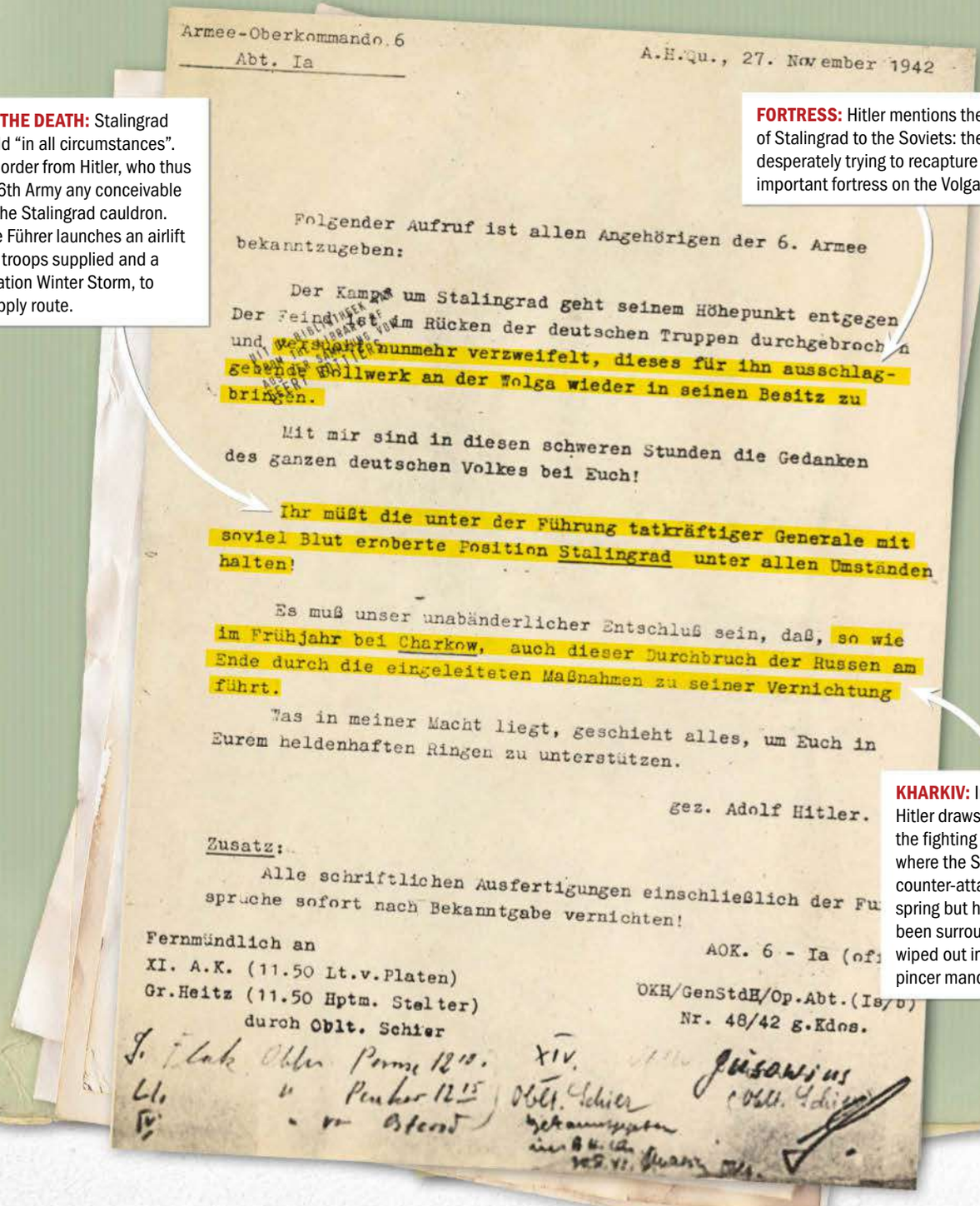
Hitler confirmed death sentence

As the ring closed on the German troops at Stalingrad, they had a slim chance of fighting their way out. But the Führer stood in their way; hundreds of thousands of German soldiers would die so Hitler didn't lose face.

For the German soldiers at Stalingrad, reality dawned immediately after being surrounded: their leader did not want a retreat that would give Stalin a propaganda victory. When the commander of the encircled 6th Army, Friedrich Paulus, asked for permission to rally the forces and fight his way out, Hitler flatly refused: *"Under the leadership of your generals you must hold Stalingrad in all circumstances – that Stalingrad conquered at such heavy cost in blood,"* he wrote back in his order.

Twelve days before Christmas 1942, the 4th Panzer Army led by Field Marshal Erich von Manstein tried to break through the cauldron from the outside, while Paulus's troops were ordered not to attempt a breakthrough from inside the ring of iron.

When Manstein's attempt failed, Hitler reduced the 6th Army to just two options: surrender or die at Stalingrad.



Armee-Oberkommando 6
Abt. Ia

A.H.Qu., 27. November 1942

Folgender Aufruf ist allen Angehörigen der 6. Armee bekanntzugeben:

Der Kampf um Stalingrad geht seinem Höhepunkt entgegen. Der Feind hat im Rücken der deutschen Truppen durchgebrochen und versucht nunmehr verzweifelt, dieses für ihn ausschlaggebende Bollwerk an der Wolga wieder in seinen Besitz zu bringen.

Mit mir sind in diesen schweren Stunden die Gedanken des ganzen deutschen Volkes bei Euch!

Ihr müßt die unter der Führung tatkräftiger Generale mit soviel Blut eroberte Position Stalingrad unter allen Umständen halten!

Es muß unser unabänderlicher Entschluß sein, daß, so wie im Frühjahr bei Charkow, auch dieser Durchbruch der Russen am Ende durch die eingeleiteten Maßnahmen zu seiner Vernichtung führt.

Was in meiner Macht liegt, geschieht alles, um Euch in Eurem heldenhaften Ringen zu unterstützen.

gez. Adolf Hitler.

Zusatz:

Alle schriftlichen Ausfertigungen einschließlich der Fu
sprüche sofort nach Bekanntgabe vernichten!

Fernmündlich an
XI. A.K. (11.50 Lt.v.Platen)
Gr.Heitz (11.50 Hptm. Stelter)
durch Oblt. Schier

AOK. 6 - Ia (of

OKH/GenStdH/Op.Abt.(Is/6)
Nr. 48/42 g.Kdos.

BATTLE TO THE DEATH: Stalingrad must be held "in all circumstances". Such is the order from Hitler, who thus denies the 6th Army any conceivable way out of the Stalingrad cauldron. Instead, the Führer launches an airlift to keep the troops supplied and a push, Operation Winter Storm, to create a supply route.

FORTRESS: Hitler mentions the importance of Stalingrad to the Soviets: the enemy "is desperately trying to recapture the important fortress on the Volga".

KHARKIV: In his order, Hitler draws parallels with the fighting at Kharkiv, where the Soviets had counter-attacked in the spring but had ultimately been surrounded and wiped out in a German pincer manoeuvre.

December. Everywhere in the ruins – in trenches, bunkers and cellars – they tried to generate a touch of Christmas spirit among the misery.

"We had conjured up a Christmas tree from a few pine branches, decorated it with silver paper from cigarette boxes, cut one of the last candles into pieces, and used the lids from empty food tins and a nail to make holders. In this way we made do," reported one soldier.

Twenty-year-old officer Hans-Erdmann Schönbeck, who commanded a small bunker on the steppe in the westernmost part of the cauldron, also insisted on having as homely a Christmas Eve as possible:

"On December 24th there were about 15 men in my bunker. That morning, under fairly heavy fire, I had managed to dig up a little pine tree buried in the snow of the steppe – probably one of the very few Christmas trees in the entire Kessel… It got dark very early. The candles were burning as I told the Christmas story and spoke the Lord's Prayer. A little later, the crackly loudspeaker transmitted a Christmas message from the Forces' radio station in Germany."

In the run-up to Christmas, the transport planes had delivered festive treats such as cognac, French wine, Dutch cheese, Danish bacon and canned fish and fruit. But the supplies flown in were so limited that few soldiers got to taste them. Schönbeck was one of the lucky ones to get an exclusive sip to fortify himself:

"We each received an extra slice of bread, and also had some French brandy – goodness knows where from – and enough wood. I went from bunker to bunker in our balka [steppe] and spoke to those on guard duty as well. Everyone's thoughts were with their loved ones back home. Meanwhile the night sky had become very clear and it turned icy cold. A very few isolated shells landed, and somewhere further off there were a few machine-gun volleys. It looked as if the Russians were letting us have our Christmas Eve. Above us the heavens cleared, revealing a starry sky. At home, two thousand kilometres away, they must have been looking at the same stars as we were. That was my bridge, my link with home."

The melancholic mood also ran through those letters the Germans wrote home on 24th December, as shells and gunfire rang out across the ruined city. One soldier, Alfons R of the 60th Infantry Division, wrote: *"We've placed a few pictures from home around the candle and are thinking of you. Our rough voices have even managed to croak 'Silent Night' and another carol, but it didn't really sound right, for there was something missing – and it was you. But I don't want to be ungrateful. I must thank God that I have been allowed to see Christmas."*

Elsewhere, a lieutenant handed out the remnants of his paper and cigarettes along with his last loaf of bread as gifts to his men: *"I myself had nothing, and yet it was one of my most beautiful Christmases and I will never forget it,"* he wrote on his very last piece of paper, which he'd reserved for his wife.



An organised mass death *is how a German general after the war described the situation in the cauldron, with starvation, suicide and the cold the major causes.*

In many of the letters, the soldiers were serene, calm and even proud to be in Stalingrad. But it wasn't long until the Christmas spirit vanished.

German morale plummeted

Christmas brought no miracles to the 6th Army. On the contrary, it was during the holiday that the soldiers finally realised that Hitler would fail to keep his promises of both supply and rescue.

"By Christmas we understood the utter hopelessness of our situation. There wasn't any help and there wasn't going to be any. We knew that we were doomed," was one assessment.

General Paulus also found it difficult to view any positives. On Christmas Day, the desperate commander sent an alarming message to Kurt Zeitzler:

"If we do not receive increased rates of supplies in the next few days, we must expect a greatly increased death rate through exhaustion."

Paulus's men had no alternative but to fight on empty stomachs and try to keep Chuikov's troops at bay. In the industrial part of northern Stalingrad, 28-year-old infantryman Hans Urban fought between Christmas and New Year until he finally succumbed.

"The enemy used to attack at dawn and at dusk, after a heavy artillery and mortar preparation. If ▸

FACTS

The area surrounded by the Red Army covered almost

2,000

square kilometres – 40 km from north to south and 50 km from east to west. Inside the pocket were 100 tanks and 2,000 pieces of artillery.

Your situation is hopeless, and any further resistance senseless. ■ **The Red Army's ultimatum to General Paulus.**

they captured two or three bunkers from us, we would try to get them back later. On 30th December, after many of these attacks, I was ordered to take my rapid-fire group forward. My nine men with their machine-guns were able to hold off the next attack by about 300 men. [The following day] after it was over, we were so weak and exhausted and there were so many dead lying around in the open frozen stiff, that we could not even bury our own comrades."

By New Year, only around 150,000 Germans remained alive in the Stalingrad cauldron, and fewer than 20% of them were actual front-line troops. And like Urban, many were close to being completely drained of anything resembling energy.

"The main reason for our surrender: lack of food, men, shells, and also the impossibility of it all – it was physically impossible for us to continue fighting," Lieutenant Herrmann Strotmann told his captors under interrogation. *"We were starving, and most of us were frostbitten."*

Staying warm was also increasingly a rare luxury, according to Sergeant Karl-Heinz Pütz :

"The heating situation is also very bad: wood is brought in once a week, but only enough for one day, to heat a stove two or three times. The men use timber from unoccupied bunkers for heating. But there's not much of that... Morale is low. Most of the men think the situation is hopeless."

From the safety of Wolf's Lair in the East Prussian forests, however, Hitler continued to make fresh promises to Paulus and the 6th Army in the Führer's New Year's greeting:

"In the name of the whole German people, I send you and your valiant army the heartiest good wishes for the New Year. The hardness of your perilous position is known to me. The heroic stand of your troops has my highest respect. You and your soldiers, however, should enter the New Year with the unshakeable confidence that I and the whole German Wehrmacht will do everything in our power to relieve the defenders of Stalingrad and that with your staunchness will come the most glorious feat in the history of German arms," Hitler's message read.

Most German soldiers knew very well that no glorious end lay just over the horizon. But the craven Paulus still felt compelled to reply that Hitler's *"confident words on the New Year were greeted here with great enthusiasm"* and that the army's soldiers *"will hold out, inspired with a fanatical will, and contribute our share to final victory"*. One week later, however, and his tone was markedly different when he messaged Zeitzler to report: *"Army starving and frozen, have no ammunition and cannot move tanks any more."*

The troops were now so decimated, according to Sergeant Helmut Pist, that the units could barely hold together: *"In early January the regiments in our division no longer existed as such. Individual groups were created that went by the names of the officers in charge."*

Everyone from the top of the Nazi hierarchy to the soldiers frozen in the ruins knew all options had been exhausted and the end was near. Yet surrender remained out of the question.



Göring was blamed *for the failure of the airlift at Stalingrad. He later claimed that Hitler devised the airbridge operation.*

Paulus answered with silence

The Red Army knew all about the condition of its ailing enemy. The Soviets busied

themselves with planning the final assault that would crack the cauldron. General Konstantin Rokossovsky, who helped surround the Germans in Operation Uranus, was given the honour of delivering the death blow to the 6th Army.

From all sides of the cauldron, the Red Army prepared to smother the Germans once and for all. Rokossovsky's troops would smash their way through the steppes into Stalingrad, while inside the city Chuikov would continue to torment the beleaguered 6th Army. But before the attack, the Germans would be given one last chance to surrender. On 8th January 1943, the Soviets sent two officers with white flags through the lines. They handed Paulus an ultimatum outlining the Germans' impossible position:

"The soldiers of the Red Army have sealed this German Army Group within an unbreakable ring. All hopes of the rescue of your troops by a German offensive [have] proved vain. The German units hastening to your assistance were defeated by the Red Army, and the remnants of that force are now withdrawing to Rostov... The situation of your troops is desperate. They are suffering from hunger, sickness and cold. The cruel Russian winter has scarcely yet begun. Hard frosts, cold winds and blizzards still lie ahead. Your soldiers are unprovided with winter clothing and are living in appalling sanitary conditions.

"You, as Commander in Chief, and all the officers of the encircled forces know well that there is for you no real possibility of breaking out. Your situation is hopeless, and any further resistance senseless. In view of the desperate situation in which you are placed, and in order to save unnecessary bloodshed, we propose that you accept the following terms of surrender:

"All the encircled German troops, headed by yourself and your staff, shall cease to resist. You will hand over to such persons as shall be authorised by us, all members of your armed forces, all war materiel and all army equipment in an undamaged condition. We guarantee the safety of all officers and men who cease to resist... [All] who surrender will immediately receive normal rations. All those who are wounded, sick or frost-bitten will be given medical treatment.

"Your reply is to be given in writing by 10.00, 9th January 1943. Should you refuse our offer that you lay down your arms, we hereby give you notice that the forces of the Red Army and the Red Airforce will be compelled to proceed with the destruction of the encircled German troops. The responsibility for this will lie with you."

Still Paulus dared not defy Hitler. The hours passed, and Rokossovsky had still heard nothing by 10.00 on 9th January. With his silence, Paulus had subjected his army to more weeks of suffering. ■

WHY WAS...

...the German airlift doomed to failure?

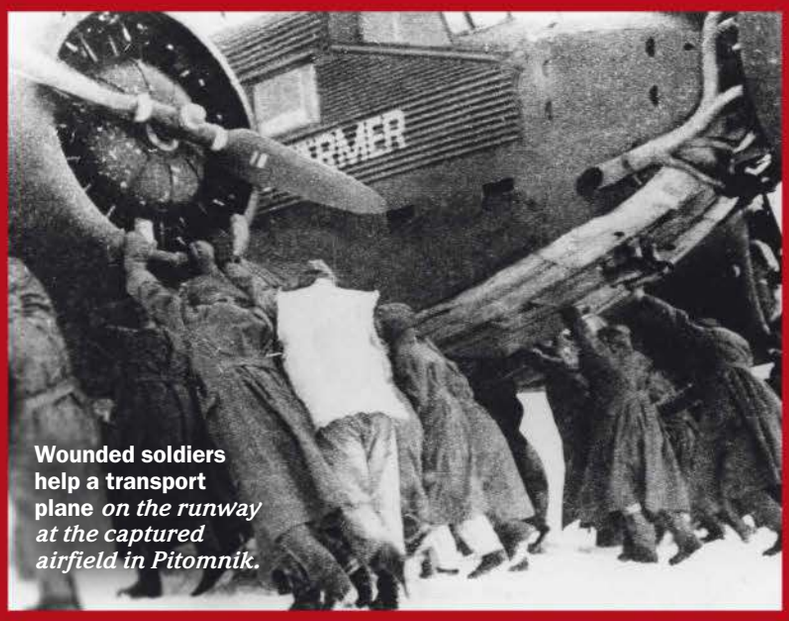
Luftwaffe chief Hermann Göring promised loud and clear that his planes could keep the 6th Army supplied via an airbridge in the Stalingrad cauldron. The promise had no basis in reality.

From January to June 1942, the Luftwaffe supplied 100,000 troops trapped in a defensive pocket at Demyansk between Leningrad and Moscow. So, Luftwaffe commander Hermann Göring had no hesitation in promising to deliver at least 500 tonnes of supplies a day to the 6th Army via an airbridge – a plan proposed by Colonel-General Hans Jeschonnek.

But in Stalingrad in November 1942, the situation was vastly different. Here the Luftwaffe had to supply almost three times the number of soldiers, but the Germans had fewer transport planes available. At the same time, the airfields outside the cauldron were hundreds of kilometres away, making the supply routes longer and more dangerous. The German Heinkel and Junker transports couldn't be protected by escort aircraft because the fighters didn't have the range to make the outward and return journeys. The Soviets, on the other hand, now had far more aircraft at their disposal to shoot down the German transports.

Göring's optimism also failed to take into account that the harshest winter months lay ahead, when bad weather would prevent many flights. Most German transport planes weren't designed for the frost and snow of the Eastern Front – one German pilot bemoaned the poor supply of spare parts and the fact the aircraft couldn't always be started in the harsh cold.

As Generals Richthofen and Zeitzler pointed out, the airbridge was doomed to failure. Whereas Göring promised 500 tonnes of supplies per day, the Luftwaffe delivered just 89.3 tonnes per day on average from the end of November. The airlift also cost the Luftwaffe dearly: it lost 488 aircraft, plus 1,000 aircraft crew.



Wounded soldiers help a transport plane *on the runway at the captured airfield in Pitomnik.*

"I saw prisoners from Stalingrad suffer"

By Henrik Elling

In 1943, Herbert Scherer was captured on the Eastern Front and sent on an agonising journey east. The 19-year-old German soldier watched his comrades die of thirst on trains, perish from dysentery, and punish their bodies working in camps. But he still feels lucky, because his hell was nothing compared to what he saw the prisoners from Stalingrad suffer.

Can you tell us how you ended up fighting on the Eastern Front?

Yes, I was born in Mannheim – it's a lovely area of Germany, close to Stuttgart and the mountains, where we often went walking. When I was 18 – in 1943 – I was drafted into the army and trained. It was just after the Battle of Stalingrad and we young men were convinced that Stalin had to be stopped or awful atrocities would befall Germany and our families in revenge. So, I volunteered for service on the Eastern Front. I was offered service in Norway or France, but I was determined to slow down the Red Army before it could reach Germany, God forbid. So, I was sent on a train to the front and arrived in the Soviet Union a few days later.

What was it like to suddenly find yourself in the middle of perhaps the most brutal fighting of World War II, on the Eastern Front?

It was a strange feeling to arrive at the front because, where I was, it was very, very peaceful. Between us and the Soviets were two kilometres of swamp, and the fighting was going on elsewhere. So we enjoyed quiet days and nights, and weren't affected by the fighting at all. We were only at war with the mosquitoes; there were so many of them and they were impossible to make peace with. I was now 19, and suddenly we had reports that the Soviets had broken through our lines a few hundred kilometres to the south and north. Then we really felt that we were far, far too few soldiers to defend the long front line.

How did you feel about the German Army's inability to fortify the front?

We could sense it in the trains on the way to the Soviet Union. Germany was relatively narrow, but the further east we went, the more the front spread out and we were split up more and more. The front was three times as long as it would have been in Germany, and we had far, far too few soldiers. So, when the Soviets broke through, there was nothing we could do, but we knew they had broken through on either side of us and we were in danger of being surrounded and captured. I had promised myself not to be captured, but to shoot myself instead, and I always kept one bullet in case the situation became hopeless.

As we were in danger of being surrounded, we tried to get out of the pincer as quickly as



HERBERT SCHERER (1925-)

Herbert Scherer was drafted into the German Army at the age of 18 and enlisted on the Eastern Front to stop Stalin and the atrocities that Scherer believed would befall Germany if the Soviet Union won. He was captured in the autumn of 1943 and spent six years in Soviet prison camps east of the Ural Mountains. In 1953, he left Germany and emigrated to Canada, where he lives today.

possible and escape. But it was impossible – there were thousands and thousands of Soviets, and we were attacked from all sides by guns and soldiers. So many of my comrades died that I don't know how I survived. It was an unfair fight.

Can you tell us about when you were captured?

Yes, I remember it clearly. We had been walking for days under heavy bombardment and were so thirsty. We had nothing to drink, so I and a few comrades went out early in the morning to look for water, and suddenly Red Army soldiers appeared among the trees. I didn't have time to think and shoot myself before I surrendered – in that situation, you react instinctively to save your life. Then all of a sudden I was a prisoner of war in the Soviet Union.

What was it like to be a prisoner of war? Were you immediately sent marching off towards the east?

I think we were lucky. Now I know about the death marches, but we only had one day's march, then we got to the trains that were supposed to transport us to the east. My destination was a town on the Volga River. Not all the way to Siberia, but the forested regions east of Moscow.

We were loaded into train wagons, which were locked, then we rolled off to the east. There was no food or water in the wagon, only a small hole in the middle of the floor that we could use as a toilet. But that was not enough, and people were defecating and urinating in the corners of the wagon. Because the troop transports from Siberia to the front had priority, we often had to wait a long time on a siding before slowly trundling on. The journey took 15 days and we were all dying of thirst.

I am sure we would have died if it had not been winter, because when the train stopped, I was able to scrape snow off the railways tracks through the toilet hole. Not much, but enough to keep me alive. In that situation, people's brains stop working properly and they turn into animals, so many of my companions tried to attack me and grab the snow to quench their own thirst, but I managed to hold on to it and got some water.

Not all my friends were so lucky. Towards the end of the train journey, we all got dysentery ▸



Thousands of German prisoners of war *marched through Kyiv in 1943. Historians estimate that up to 700,000 German men perished in Soviet prison camps.*



Timber from Siberia. *Herbert Scherer avoided the dreaded work in the mines and instead cut timber for the Soviet Union's great railway projects.*

because the snow we ate was dirty – sometimes from our own faeces. There weren't many of us left at that point. People often think it's the big and strong who survive, but it was the little ones, like me. The bigger bodies needed so much energy to stay alive that they succumbed really quickly.

Which camp did you end up in when you finally got there? Can you tell us about it?

We were initially placed in the town of Gorky on the Volga River. It was a beautiful, beautiful place and the peasants we met were very friendly and had plenty. We, on the other hand, had nothing to eat. We were put in hospital to see whether we survived – without treatment. If your body couldn't take any more, you were left to die. I prayed to die many times, but miraculously got over the dysentery and was sent to a prison camp about ten kilometres outside the city.

It was in the prison camp that you first saw prisoners of war from the Battle of Stalingrad. I know you saw them being treated particularly badly. Can you tell us about that?

Yes, in the camp I first saw the Germans who had been captured at Stalingrad. They were kept apart from the rest of us, and – oh my God. I suffered, but they were given less food and were beaten, whipped and tortured for the slightest offences. They were miserable and looked like walking corpses. The Stalingrad prisoners were set tasks that were supposed to work them to death. They were made to carry timber out of the forest two or three times a day – a journey of ten kilometres. Afterwards, they had to carry it back again, a trip that had no purpose except to torture the life out of them. I dare not think how few survived.

You were also put to work getting timber. What was the lumber for?

Yes, we had to cut down trees, too, and carry them to the concentration camps, but although the work was hard, it was nothing like that of the Stalingrad prisoners. The Soviets burned the timber to provide heat and electricity for the town of Gorky, near the camp.

You were in a prison camp until 1949. Did you stay in the camp at Gorky for all those years?

No, after a while we were sent to Siberia, and that was an ordeal for all of us. In the summer, it was unbelievably hot and the barracks were full of lice, mosquitoes and creepy-crawlies – and, of course, there were rats everywhere. In winter, on the other hand, it was freezing cold and we had to eat frozen food, which thawed inside our mouths. This made us even colder.

I got frostbite in my foot and went to hospital again, sure that I was finished. If you lost a foot, you were simply left to die because you couldn't work any more. Again, I was lucky – my foot got better and I was discharged and sent back to the camp.

All those years, we lived on thin soup and a few slices of dry bread that was about an inch thick and rock hard, so it would keep for as long as possible. Eventually, I stopped having bowel movements. I stopped going to the toilet; the body starts taking all the nutrition out of the food you get, and at the same time, it has to fight dysentery, tuberculosis, rat bites and all sorts of different diseases.

Of course, few could survive for long, and as I said earlier, the bodies of the biggest men needed to absorb as much nutrition as possible to keep healthy, so they died the quickest.

You also suffered from tuberculosis but survived. Can you tell us about it?

Yes, at one point my barracks were hit by tuberculosis and the six men closest to me all died. Because I survived, the Soviets decided that I must be immune to the disease and sent me for tests at the hospital, where I had X-rays taken to find out how I could survive. Of course, they found nothing. I was just lucky.

It was the same with malaria. Many of my comrades died of malaria, but the mosquitoes didn't bite me. They still don't. When I'm out with my wife in the summer, they always land on her instead of me. The mosquitoes don't like me. I was just lucky; I should be dead.

And then you were finally sent home to Germany. How was it to go back? You must have been happy…

I couldn't believe it when we found out. We were finally going home, and I had survived. But it didn't end happily. I returned home to shame and hate, and I was very ill. My heart, kidneys and liver had broken down and Germany had changed. Everyone hated me and called me a Nazi and a traitor. I couldn't get a job. My parents let me live with them but also expressed disgust for me. I felt alienated and exhausted after all I had been through, and considered taking my own life many times.

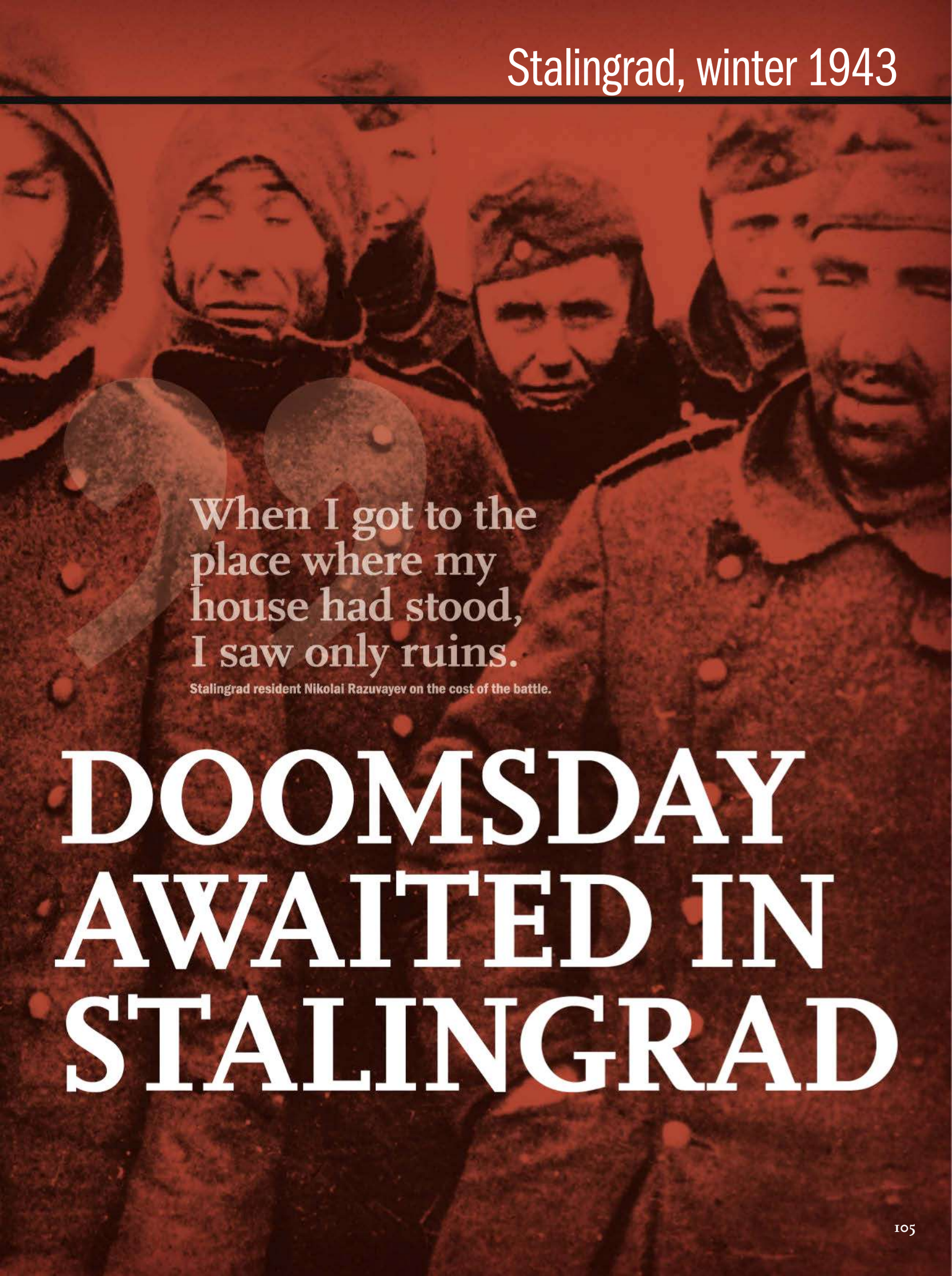
I realised that there was no future for me in Germany, and one day in 1953 I happened to see an advertisement for a ship sailing to Canada. The price of the ticket was 2,000 marks, and I didn't have that kind of money because I didn't have a steady job. So, that day I went out and played football for the first time in my life without knowing anything about football, then I prayed to God. It's hard to believe, but I got enough money for the ticket and a month later I left for Canada. Because of those 2,000 marks, I'm sitting here today talking to you. It saved my life, and I've had a good life in Canada. ■



The very last German prisoners of war *returned home in 1955 – ten years after the end of the war. For Herbert Scherer, the homecoming was difficult and lonely.*



Wretched German troops *surrender to the Soviets at Stalingrad in 1943. Of the approximately 95,000 prisoners of war, fewer than one in 19 returned home alive.*



> When I got to the place where my house had stood, I saw only ruins.
>
> Stalingrad resident Nikolai Razuvayev on the cost of the battle.

DOOMSDAY AWAITED IN STALINGRAD

Doomsday awaited in Stalingrad

In early 1943, a brutal nightmare awaited the German soldiers fighting a lost battle against hunger, cold and empty cartridge boxes. Their commander was left helpless when, on 10th January, the Soviets launched a final major attack to liberate Stalingrad and crush the remnants of the German 6th Army.

By Troels Ussing

Everyone on both sides of the front knew that the Germans' days in Stalingrad were numbered. When the Red Army, with 218,000 men and General Konstantin Rokossovsky at the front, launched Operation Ring on the morning of 10th January 1943, there was no doubt what the outcome would be. The offensive would crush the last of the German 6th Army's steppe defences west of Stalingrad, end the torment of the encircled soldiers and liberate the city.

The opposing general, Friedrich Paulus, was in a hopeless situation. Yet he had not dignified the Soviets with a response to their terms of surrender. The Soviets considered the silence an insult. They had made a fair offer – if they honoured their promises. The Germans' silence could only be answered with deadly fire. With 5,610 field guns and mortars, the Red Army paralysed the enemy before troops rushed forward, covered by 169 tanks and 300 aircraft.

"The enemy suffered enormous casualties from our fire. Our infantry swiftly advanced through the enemy's front lines and continued to push on. At every step, there were blackened German bodies [and] wrecked enemy guns. … The country, white the day before, was now grey with soot and smoke, and dotted with thousands of black shell holes. In spite of these enormous losses, the enemy continued to resist. … This fighting continued till 13th January, when our troops captured the whole western part of the pocket," wrote a Soviet colonel of the fighting in the initial phase of the operation.



The Univermag department store *was the last bastion of the German commander in Stalingrad, General Friedrich Paulus. In January, the building was surrounded.*

The pocket was attacked from all sides and, advancing rapidly on the icy ground, the Red Army encountered large piles of frozen corpses, battered by the barrage of Soviet shells.

"The dead are lying, grotesquely twisted, their mouths and eyes still wide open with horror, frozen stiff, with their skulls torn open and their bowels hurled out, most of them with bandages on their hands and feet," noted German Communist Erich Weinert, who'd fled Hitler's Nazi rule in the 1930s and followed the Soviet troops as a propagandist.

War correspondent Vasily Grossman was also behind the front line. The reporter noted how winter's sub-zero temperatures were as big a killer of Germans as the Soviet T-34 tanks.

"Snow and the freezing air ice up your nostrils. Your teeth ache. There are frozen Germans, their bodies undamaged, along the road we follow. It wasn't us who killed them. The cold did. They have bad boots and bad coats. Their tunics are thin and look like paper … There are footprints all over the snow. They tell us how the Germans withdrew from the villages along the roads, and from the roads into the ravines, throwing their arms away," Grossman wrote. Temperatures often dipped below minus 30 degrees during the winter months.

With death on their heels, the soldiers of the 6th Army trudged towards the city, hoping that salvation lay there. In the midst of this misery, 30-year-old officer Joachim Wieder noticed how the situation in Stalingrad had changed drastically in six months.

"Drifting along through the snowstorm, this was the wreck of the 6th Army that had advanced to the Volga during the summer, so confident of victory. Men from all over Germany, doomed to destruction in a far-off land, mutely enduring their suffering, tottered in pitiful droves through the murderous eastern winter. These were the same soldiers who had formerly marched through large parts of Europe as proud conquerors. Now the enemy was at their backs and death lurked everywhere."

The soldiers hoped they'd find salvation further east. But there was no redemption in the Stalingrad

pocket. Quite the opposite. Around the city, soldiers were forced to spend three more weeks in hell.

Airfield plagued by chaos

Many of the soldiers fled to the westernmost of the two remaining airfields in the pocket that remained in German hands. Pitomnik airfield had been the destination of wounded soldiers for two months, because the Germans had a large field hospital there. Here the troops were treated or sent home to their fatherland on a Heinkel or Junkers plane – if they were lucky. But there was no way the aircraft could carry all the thousands of wounded, who lay in long rows in icy tents, often freezing to death.

"Here was the greatest misery that I have seen in my whole life. An endless wailing of wounded and dying men … most of them had received nothing to eat for days. No more food was given out to the wounded. Supplies were reserved for fighting troops," read the words of an artilleryman named Alois Dorner, while officer Edgar Klaus reported that *"the airfield was in chaos: heaps of corpses, which men had carried out of the bunkers and tents which house the wounded and dumped".*

Every day, 417 men on average were flown out, but in the final days, as the Soviets approached with their anti-aircraft guns, even fewer got away. The wounded stood in long queues, waiting in the cold, but the lucky few who could struggle aboard were not safe until the plane had landed on German territory.

"The planes could not gain height quickly enough and ran into heavy flak, thus coming to a terrible end. I saw from my trench on several occasions this apocalyptic fate and was very, very depressed," recalled infantryman Siegfried Mühler. His compatriot, Corporal Joachim Grunow, saw how the Soviet fighters watched over Pitomnik like merciless, ferocious birds of prey: *"Every half hour, Russian aircraft attacked the airfield. Many comrades who were just about to be saved, having been loaded into aircraft, and were waiting to take off lost their lives at the very last moment."*

On the morning of 15th January, the German troops at Pitomnik could hear Rokossovsky's army approaching. The wounded, who were able to escape towards the smaller airfield of Gumrak in the east, trudged across the snowy steppes. The lucky ones were transported by truck or ambulance, but the few remaining opportunities to leave Stalingrad alive were disappearing by the day.

Last plane left the pocket

The Red Army captured over half of the pocket on 16th January, just six days into the Soviets' final counteroffensive. At least 25,000 German defenders had fallen. The advancing Soviets encountered so many corpses on their way that they had difficulty finding places to sleep. Infantryman Mikhail Alexeyev discovered that the captured trenches and bunkers were full of death.



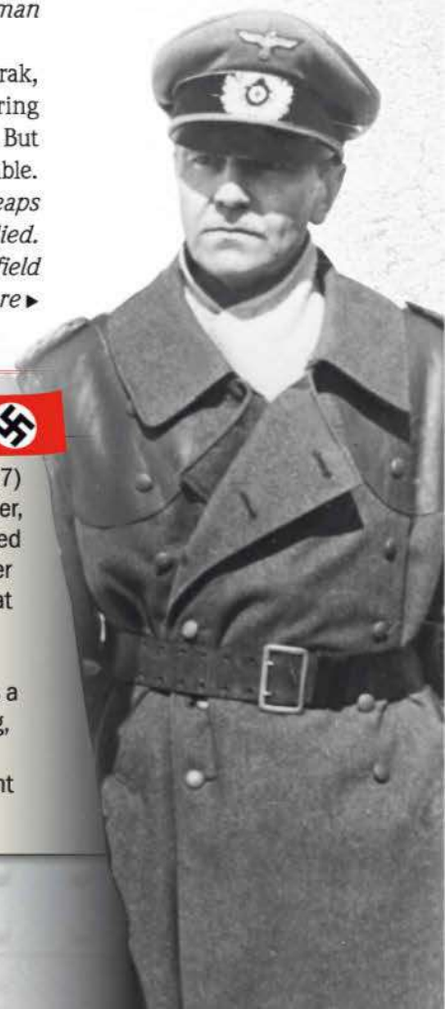
Spades from the Red Army were found in 2015. They were often used as weapons.

War materiel still emerges from the ground in Stalingrad, now Volgograd.

"I was looking for a place to hide until morning, to get some sleep. There were many German positions safe, but nothing was available. I couldn't use them, because the bodies of German soldiers took up all the ground… There were also so many maggots because of the dead bodies. And oh, the lice, the lice! I saw a dugout in the snow. I had warm clothing, so I went in there and bumped against something very stiff. It was dark, so I couldn't see what it was. I thought they were sacks or something. So I made myself comfortable lying on these sacks. In the light of morning, I saw that I was sleeping on the bodies of killed German soldiers," he wrote.

Meanwhile, thousands of Germans fled to Gumrak, 15 kilometres outside Stalingrad, to avoid suffering the same fate as their compatriots in the trenches. But on the way and at the airport, death was inescapable.

"It was a form of hell. The corpses lay in heaps beside the road, where men had fallen and died. Nobody cared. There were no bandages. The airfield was under bombardment, and 40 men were ▸



FRIEDRICH WILHELM PAULUS (1890-1957)
Although Paulus was not a skilled military leader, he rose to the top of the army. Hitler appreciated Paulus's orderliness and made him commander of the 6th Army in January 1942. After defeat at Stalingrad, he spent the next ten years in captivity in Moscow, where he publicly supported Communism. The field marshal was a broken man and, while testifying at Nuremberg, was dubbed the Ghost of Stalingrad by the media. In 1953, Paulus was released and spent four years in East Germany before his death.



Soviets embraced and kissed *as surrounding forces made contact with the 62nd Army, which had been defending Stalingrad for five months.*

packed into a bunker dug for ten, which shook with every explosion," reported one of the wounded.

The chaplain at the airfield's small hospital was known as the "Death King of Gumrak" because he said farewell to hundreds of soldiers every day. The airport was the last route out of the pocket, but for the majority of wounded soldiers, Gumrak was a dead end. The threat from Soviet aircraft was so great that few German transport planes could land and take off, leaving soldiers with little chance of getting out alive.

On 22nd January, the last Heinkel transport aircraft touched down on the runway at Gumrak. Supplies were quickly unloaded before 19 wounded soldiers hobbled aboard. They were the last to leave the area via Gumrak. The plane also held the final sack of letters from the formerly enthusiastic troops. One of them was from a trapped soldier who had lost all hope of a happy ending for the 6th Army:

"I was horrified when I saw the map. We're quite alone, without any help from outside. Hitler has left us in the lurch. ... [W]e are not going to be captured. When Stalingrad falls you will hear and read about it. Then you will know that I shall not return," he wrote.

Paulus begged Hitler to surrender

On the same day that Rokossovsky's tanks and soldiers captured Gumrak, Paulus realised that he had to make a clear statement to Hitler. The general had been headquartered at the fallen airfield and had seen the severity of the crisis first-hand. He allowed his despair to be heard in his tone with the Führer:

"Rations exhausted. What orders should I give to troops who have no more ammunition and are subjected to mass attacks supported by heavy artillery fire?" Paulus reported that *"disintegration is already starting in some places"*. Two days later, the Soviets approached the western suburbs of Stalingrad, while General Chuikov was still pressing in from the east. Now Hitler's loyal army commander asked directly for the Führer's permission to make the right decision:

"As a result of strong incursions, the front has been torn open. Firing points and shelter are available only inside the city. Collapse is inevitable. The army requests permission to surrender so as to save the lives of those that remain."

Adolf Hitler's advisers, Kurt Zeitzler and Erich von Manstein, tried to convince him that the battle was lost. But giving up in Stalin's city was a humiliation the Führer could not accept.

"Forbid surrender. The army will hold its position to the last soldier and last cartridge, and its heroic contribution to the building of defensive front and the salvation of Western civilisation," was his reply.

Just two days later, forces from Rokossovsky's army wedged their way between the 6th Army's defenders. Here they joined up with Vasily Chuikov's troops from the 62nd Army, who had been defending the city alone since September. The meeting caused the Soviet soldiers to embrace and kiss each other on the shelled hill of Mamayev Kurgan.

Advance cut German resistance in two

The Germans' pocket at Stalingrad was split in two by the Soviet advance. In the northern part, General Kurt Strecker was trapped with his remaining forces in the industrial area. Paulus was in the southern part with the rest of the 6th Army.

Following the loss of Gumrak, the army chief had moved with his staff into a large basement complex under the Univermag department store on Red Square in the city centre, south of Mamayev Kurgan. The remains of Colonel Friedrich Roske's 194th Grenadier Regiment defended the war-torn building, where a tattered swastika flag fluttered from a balcony. In the labyrinth of underground rooms, 250 German soldiers sheltered from the Soviet shelling.

Paulus spent most of his time lying listlessly in bed, afflicted by nervous tics. Physically, he was severely weakened by dysentery, while psychologically, the endless winter of warfare had broken down any capacity for leadership in his emaciated body. A week earlier, he had put his wedding ring in an envelope with a final letter to his wife. Mentally, the commander had given up, and Hitler's refusal to allow surrender did nothing to ease Paulus's condition.

The fact that on 30th January the Führer had promoted Paulus to the most senior military rank, field marshal, did not help. The commander and his staff knew very well that Hitler had an ulterior motive. No German field marshal had ever surrendered, and by awarding Paulus the rank, the

FACTS

While airlifts were operational, the Germans carried up to

35,000

wounded out of the pocket. Many soldiers clung to the planes as they took off, until they ran out of strength and fell.

Führer prevented the 6th Army commander from capitulating. It was clear that Hitler expected Paulus to commit suicide rather than become the highest-ranking German officer ever captured.

The Soviets knew nothing of Paulus's promotion. The Red Army moved forward with little resistance, and that day, the Soviet 64th Army, having slowly crushed the pocket from the south, stood only two kilometres south of Red Square. The troops under General Mikhail Shumilov had gathered momentum and were looking forward to victory.

"Our men were in high spirits. On 30th January, we took the train station. … But there was still no word on Paulus. We heard he'd flown out. Then, when we started getting large groups of prisoners, the officers told us that Paulus was in some basement with his staff. This had its effect on our men and officers. It would be something to capture him," said 64th Army political officer Alexander Yegorov.

After further investigation, the Soviets discovered that Paulus was hiding beneath Univermag. In the early hours of 31st January, soldiers of the 64th Army surrounded the department store and Colonel Roske's exhausted and frostbitten defence forces ceased their resistance. It was 07.35 when German headquarters sent a signal to a nearby German command centre: ▸

German doctors coldly divided wounded

Wounded Germans received no or very little treatment in the field hospitals of the pocket. Only a small group received genuine help from the doctors, who had to make difficult choices between life and death 24 hours a day.

As winter gripped Stalingrad, chaos reigned in the German field hospitals at Pitomnik and Gumrak airports, now the 6th Army's last way out of the pocket. Every day, ambulances and sledges arrived with more wounded or sick soldiers, suffering from dysentery or jaundice, for example. The field medics' workload was growing so fast that they had to decide which soldiers could live and which must die.

The worst-off were left to lie in freezing tents and die without treatment. Doctors only admitted those who had a chance of being patched up and regaining the ability to fight. Minor injuries, such as flesh wounds and frostbite, usually just earned a return ticket to the front. Before that, doctors hurried to remove the bandages the soldiers had applied, because they were usually crawling with lice. The medics cleaned the wounds and injected a tetanus vaccine into the men's wasted muscles before they returned to combat.

Military police intervened if the doctors' assessments caused trouble. The soldiers called the police *Kettenhunde* – chain dogs – because they also carried out executions when doctors spotted men with a bullet wound in their right hand. The injury was the most common way of harming oneself in the hope of escaping Stalingrad.



Frozen bodies were piled in heaps, *and almost every deceased soldier was robbed of anything of value, such as food, boots or warm clothes.*

1943

After the 6th Army is surrounded at Stalingrad, the Red Army launches more attacks. It will not be until the winter of 1943 that the German Army can offer real resistance.

13/1 As part of Operation Little Saturn, the Soviets try to cut off the Germans in the Caucasus by driving a wedge westwards. The operation is a partial success, but the German troops escape.

Paulus surrendered *with 24 generals. Some, including Paulus, were then recruited into the Soviet propaganda machine.*



Friedrich Wilhelm Paulus

29/1 Operation Gallop tries to capture German troops again east of Donetsk in Ukraine. The Germans hastily withdraw.

2/2 From Voronezh to the north, during Operation Star the Soviets attack the cities of Kharkiv and Kursk, which they retake in mid-February.

19/2 With Erich von Manstein in charge, the Germans retake Kharkiv because the Soviets can't keep the advance supplied.



"The Russians are at the door of our bunker." With those words, the victor was finally proclaimed after five months of hell in Stalingrad.

Paulus surrendered in basement

Hitler was convinced that his promotion had ensured that Paulus would not surrender and be taken prisoner. But the newly appointed field marshal had other ideas. Paulus was a Christian and notoriously opposed to suicide. The otherwise blindly loyal general was done fighting both the enemy and Hitler.

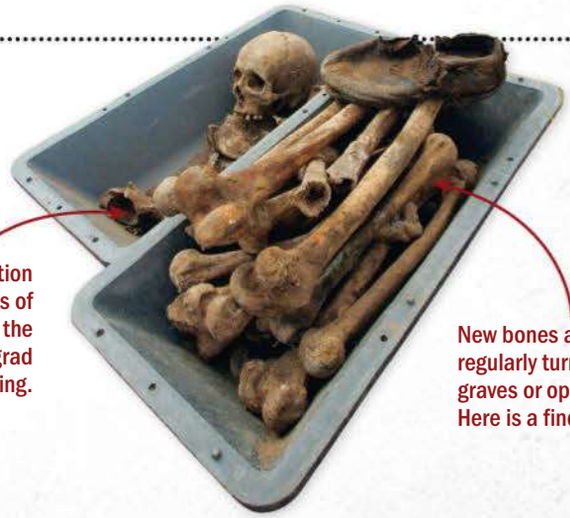
"I have no intention of shooting myself for this Bohemian corporal," Paulus said with rare sarcasm in his voice. His comment referred to the fact that Hitler was neither German – although he was not Bohemian either – nor did he have any military background other than the lowest rank of command.

Two Soviet lieutenants, Leonid Vinokur and Fyodor Ilchenko, were the first to enter Univermag's labyrinth of basement rooms. According to the Soviets, the *"stench was unbelievable"* down there, and *"you couldn't get through the front or back doors, the filth came up to your chest, along with human waste"*.

Chief of Staff Arthur Schmidt and Friedrich Roske, whom Hitler had appointed general the day before, received the Soviets. They explained that the German troops hadn't been able to dispose of the waste because of the constant bombardment. Instead, the staff had lived with the stench for days.

Barely an hour after the lieutenants had made contact with the German army command, Soviet General Ivan Laskin arrived. His rank was sufficiently high for the Germans to surrender to him. Paulus felt so wretched that Chief of Staff Schmidt had to discuss the terms of surrender. A German colonel went back and forth between the negotiating table and the field marshal in the office opposite, to keep him informed. After messages had passed to and fro for some time, however, Laskin insisted that the Soviet delegation meet with Paulus so they could formally arrest him.

"Paulus's room was dark. The filth was unbelievable. Paulus stood up when I went in. He ▸



The identification of skeletons of those killed at the Battle of Stalingrad is still ongoing.

New bones and skulls regularly turn up in mass graves or open fields. Here is a find from 2006.

When you have a revolver it's quite easy. How cowardly you must be to flinch before such a deed! ■ **Adolf Hitler condemns General Paulus for surrendering and not committing suicide.**



hadn't shaved in a few weeks and he looked defeated. … He'd been lying there in his coat and cap," recalled Lieutenant Vinokur.

"General Laskin gave his name and rank, declared Paulus a prisoner, and told him to surrender his personal weapons. Field Marshal Paulus then gave his own name and rank and stated that he was surrendering to Soviet forces … And then, when General Laskin asked Paulus whether he was ill, he replied that he was well but had been affected by the poor diet and the long, drawn-out agonising experience of the ignominious capitulation of his army. And then he took out of his trouser pocket some small cubes of baked bread, like we used to make with oil. He showed them to us and said: '150 grams a day – that's all I've had to eat for many days now. I've been sharing my starvation rations with my soldiers, who only get 50 grams a day,'" recalled General Mutin from the Soviet delegation, who was also at the meeting.

Later in the day, the emaciated Paulus was escorted to a car that took him and Schmidt to 64th Army headquarters. There the army commander, General Shumilov, received him. The Soviet, a bulky man, was not impressed by the bony German commander's appearance, describing the person who was led into his office as tall, grizzled and exhausted. Paulus began to make Hitler salutes and proclaim *"Heil Hitler"* but changed his mind and said, *"Guten Tag."*

Paulus was wearing his general's uniform, because he hadn't yet received the appropriate one for a field marshal. Arthur Schmidt, following his commander, therefore informed Shumilov of the recent promotion: *"We have received Hitler's order by radio saying that Paulus has been awarded the rank of field marshal."*

"May I report this to my supreme command?" General Shumilov asked.

Both Schmidt and Paulus said yes.

The capture of a field marshal, not just a general, only added to the Soviet triumph. Vodka arrived at the table, while the German officers were served a much-needed meal. Soviet staffer Konstantin Abramov also poured some vodka into Field Marshal Paulus's glass.

"At first Paulus refused to drink. Then I pushed him to take a glass. He said: 'I can't, I haven't eaten.' Then he▸

Hitler was shocked *when Paulus surrendered. The formerly faithful general turned against the Führer, who regarded a hero's death for the Reich to be a natural sacrifice.*

Only 5,000 Germans survived Soviet captivity



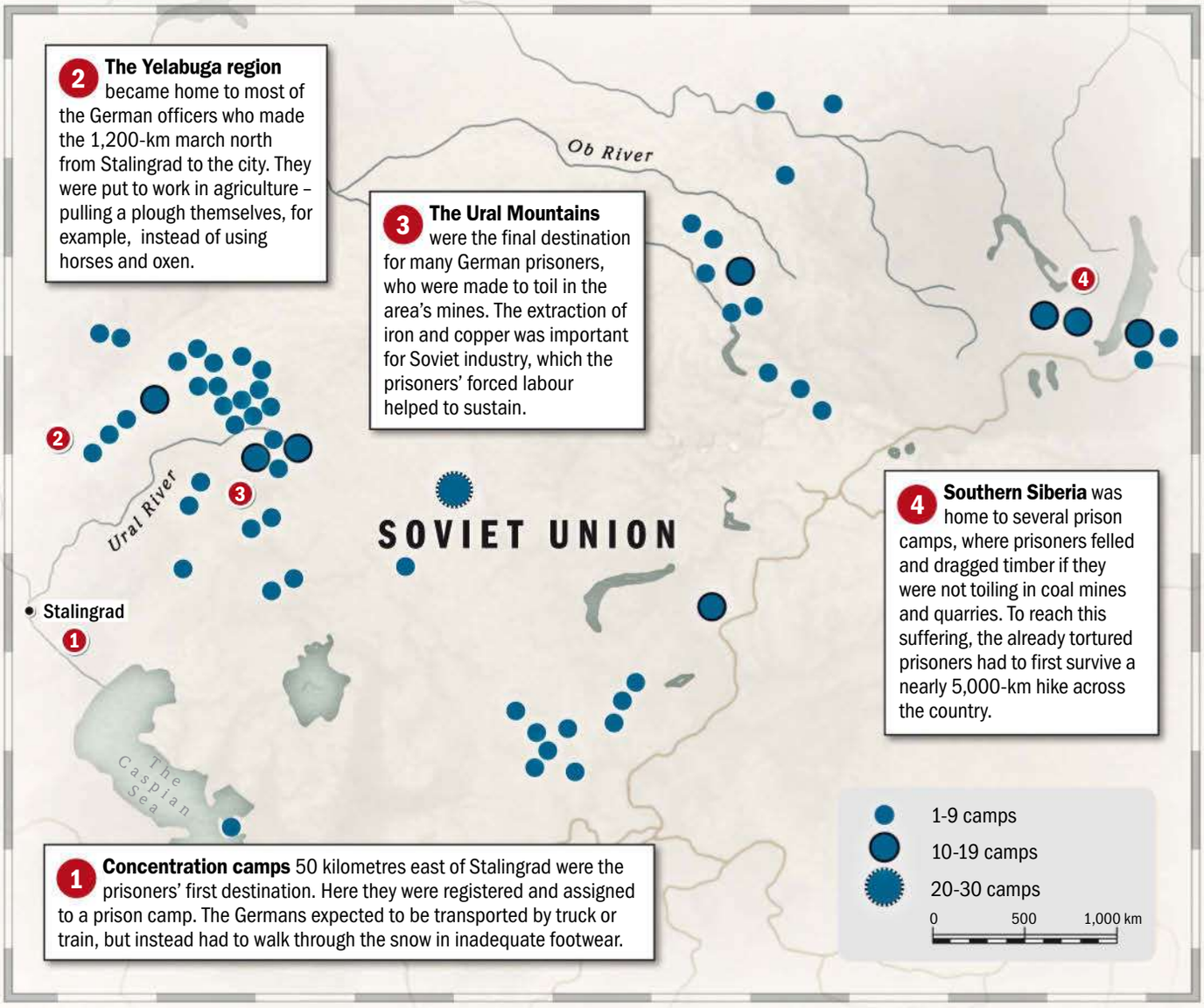
Straight after their surrender in early February 1943, a new nightmare began for the troops of the German 6th Army. The Luftwaffe had destroyed the railway network, so the Soviets decided that only prisoners who could get to the prison camps by their own means would escape being killed. Many wounded were therefore shot on the spot, while a few remained in Stalingrad, where they were forced to rebuild the city they had destroyed.

Exactly how many prisoners the Soviets took varies according to sources, but the Red Army put the figure at 95,000. This included only those who reached the camps outside Stalingrad. Many died on the long marches to the camps, up to 5,000 km away in Siberia. There, a life of brutal attacks, hunger, disease and cold awaited. The prisoners had to work at least ten hours a day and received 500 grams of bread and some potato or cauliflower soup.

The hardships in the camps were so bad that only 5,000 of the 95,000 POWs returned to Germany alive when the Soviets began releasing prisoners in 1953. The men bore both physical and psychological scars from Stalingrad and 12 years of hard labour.



Captured Germans are led *past the silo over which they'd fought a bitter battle.*



2 The Yelabuga region became home to most of the German officers who made the 1,200-km march north from Stalingrad to the city. They were put to work in agriculture – pulling a plough themselves, for example, instead of using horses and oxen.

3 The Ural Mountains were the final destination for many German prisoners, who were made to toil in the area's mines. The extraction of iron and copper was important for Soviet industry, which the prisoners' forced labour helped to sustain.

4 Southern Siberia was home to several prison camps, where prisoners felled and dragged timber if they were not toiling in coal mines and quarries. To reach this suffering, the already tortured prisoners had to first survive a nearly 5,000-km hike across the country.

1 Concentration camps 50 kilometres east of Stalingrad were the prisoners' first destination. Here they were registered and assigned to a prison camp. The Germans expected to be transported by truck or train, but instead had to walk through the snow in inadequate footwear.

FACTS

The victims of Stalingrad didn't die entirely in vain. The 6th Army held out just long enough for the **German troops in the Caucasus to withdraw**. The total loss would have been higher if Paulus had surrendered earlier.

said: 'We're not accustomed to drinking vodka.' Then he drank a glass, then a second. … We'd been talking for a while already, just sitting there. I asked him why he didn't get out of the encirclement when he was free to leave. He said: 'That's for history to decide,'" Abramov recalled.

Paulus's hopeless struggle had so far condemned some 250,000 Germans to death in the Stalingrad pocket. But the news of his surrender didn't reach all the remaining Germans, who were hiding in bunkers and cellars in the city's ruins. As a result, the fighting didn't stop immediately and many soldiers of the 6th Army fought on defiantly, losing their lives even though their commander had already given up.

Red Army captured hordes of Germans

In the southern pocket, where Paulus had been, the fighting subsided in less than a day as word of the official surrender quickly spread.

"Those last days in Stalingrad were horrible: thousands of dead bodies, and the wounded men dying in the streets because the hospitals were overcrowded … The surrender wasn't organised. Our bunker was 50 metres from our divisional HQ, but even though we were so close to them, we only learned about the surrender after the Russians had already showed up," German soldier Helmut Pist recollected afterwards. Moreover, the last battles cost unnecessary blood, because it took lot of persuasion to get the Germans to surrender. The Soviets had to repeatedly attack German entrenchments before the soldiers surrendered.

"We'd shoot five or six times with the big guns and then send an envoy. If they didn't surrender, we'd shoot another five or six times, send the envoy. If that didn't do it, we shot at them again. Then they'd start to line up and beg to be taken prisoner," explained Lieutenant Leonid Vinokur of the Red Army.

In the isolated northern pocket, the defence continued within the heavily fortified industrial districts. The forces in the north, led by General Kurt Strecker, had no idea about the surrender and continued to fight. Resistance only stopped when Soviet planes began to scatter photographs of Paulus's capitulation over the area. On the morning of 2nd February 1943, Strecker surrendered.

"No more sign of fighting in Stalingrad," a German reconnaissance plane reported a few hours later.

In Germany, three days of national mourning were declared after the loss of Stalingrad and the 6th Army became public knowledge. The population mourned its dead and the thousands of captured soldiers, who would soon take the long road out of the ruins of Stalingrad to prison camps in the east.

On their way, a group of Germans from the 297th Infantry Division was confronted by a Soviet officer who pointed at the destroyed buildings in the city and shouted vengefully, *"That's how Berlin is going to look!"* The comment



Soviets dismantle the machine guns *of an abandoned Messerschmitt Bf 109 fighter. Over 700 Luftwaffe aircraft were lost in the battle.*

I could hear their skulls crack beneath my wheel. Bones too. And I was glad. ■ A female driver speaking about the fallen Germans left behind.

was to prove almost prophetic, for in the ruins of Stalingrad, the Red Army had finally turned the tide of war.

Hitler raged at lack of sacrifice

When the news of Paulus's surrender reached Wolf's Lair on 31st January, Hitler's face turned red with rage. Hours later, the Führer still hadn't calmed down when he gathered his staff around the conference room table.

"In peacetime Germany, about 18,000 or 20,000 people a year chose to commit suicide, even without being in such a position. Here is a man who sees 50,000 or 60,000 of his soldiers die defending themselves bravely to the end. How can he surrender himself to the Bolshevists?" blasted the Führer.

The fact that the German Army had lost over a quarter of a million soldiers since the Soviet encirclement was of less real concern to Hitler than the fact that Paulus had not taken his own life.

"But I had my doubts before. That was at the moment when I received the report that he was asking me what he should do," the Führer continued his tirade. He referred to the fact that after receiving the Soviet ultimatum on 8th January, Paulus had asked for advice on his next military move. *"How could he ever ask about such a thing? ... When you have a revolver it's quite easy. How cowardly you must be to flinch before such a deed! It would be better to allow yourself to be buried alive! It's even worse. Paulus was in a position where he knew that his death would make the other pocket resist even more fiercely. When you give the sort of example he has given, you can't expect men to go on fighting."*

Hitler bitterly regretted the appointment of Paulus as field marshal. The ruse to get the commander to blow his brains out had backfired and magnified the enemy's triumph. In front of his staff, the Führer declared the mistake wouldn't repeated: *"In this war, no more field marshals will be made. I won't go on counting my chickens before they are hatched."*

Nowhere in the Führer's immediate analysis was there room for self-inspection. The soldiers of the 6th Army had been sacrificed solely because of Hitler's obsession with humiliating Stalin at Stalingrad. Ten years after the war, German military historian Hans Doerr was crystal clear in his verdict:

"Stalingrad has to enter history as the greatest mistake ever committed by military▸

Families' uncertainty continued after battle

Even after the battle was lost, the torment continued for troops' families. Many were left not knowing the fate of their sons.

Munich, 31.5.43

Dear Mr Oehus,

Now that I have seen the pictures of your son, I remember him quite clearly. Knowing only the name, I could do nothing.

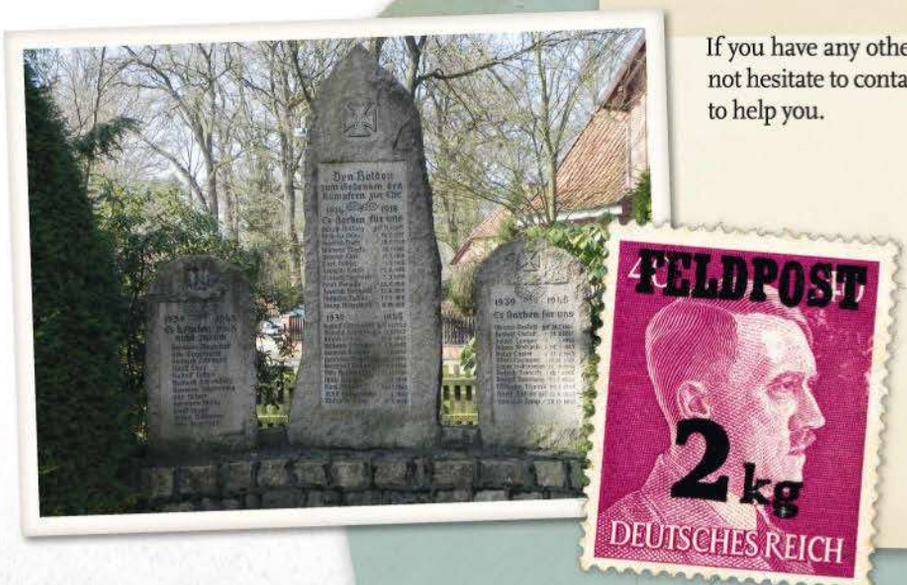
As I already wrote in my last letter, I can only say so much about your son, that he was still alive on 22nd January 1943 – the day I was wounded and transported out.

Unfortunately, I do not know what became of him and all his comrades. I assume, however, that he is in Russian captivity. For on 22nd January, the remnants of our platoon, including your son, moved to the city of Stalingrad itself, where we had built very good bunkers that could withstand a little bit of everything.

So there is hope that your son is still alive. Although he will not have an easy life in captivity with the Russians, the prospect that he is still alive and may still be able to return at the end of the war may be a comfort to you and your dear family to hold on to until everything is cleared up after the war is over.

If you have any other questions that I can answer for you, please do not hesitate to contact me. As far as it is in my power, I will be happy to help you.

Greetings and all the best!
Yours, F Osthoff



The family never heard from their son Rudolf again, *and his fate was uncertain. A memorial and letters from Stalingrad are all that remain of the war.*

commanders, as the greatest disdain to the live organism of the army ever demonstrated by the leadership of the country," he wrote about the campaign.

However, during a meeting with General Erich von Manstein in Wolf's Lair on 5th February 1943, Hitler came close to taking the blame for the failure of Stalingrad. But he did not believe that the defeat was due to his strategy.

"As for Stalingrad, I alone bear the responsibility. I might perhaps say that Göring gave me an inaccurate picture of the Luftwaffe's capabilities of supplying the army from the air and so I could possibly make him take some of the blame. But I myself have appointed him to succeed me and so I must accept the responsibility entirely myself," Hitler said, according to Manstein. Thus the Führer elegantly transferred blame for the defeat to Hermann Göring.

Stalingrad was so devastated *that the Soviets considered rebuilding the city elsewhere.*

Stalingrad ravaged by war for years

For the first time since the initial German aerial bombardments in August 1942, Stalingrad lay still. Almost six months of hell had been replaced by a sense of redemption. As the fighting finally ended, the few remaining civilians cautiously crept out of their hiding places and shared their joy with their liberators. For soldier Alexander Lukash, one of the few to have fought and survived in Stalingrad since September, the final day of liberation, 2nd February 1943, seemed magical:

"That day … was the most joyful and happy day of my life. It was joyful first and foremost because we had won, we had defended the city of Stalingrad and held on to it. But I was happy too because I had come out of that inferno alive, and I was not the only one who was celebrating. I saw men weep, young ones and grey-haired elderly ones. Everywhere people were embracing and kissing each other. How sad that so many did not live to see that day," he said later.

The price of defending the city had been enormous. According to General Andrey Yeremenko, the Soviets lost just 46,700 troops, but subsequent, far more credible estimates put the Soviet casualty figure at something close to ten times that. But in Moscow, the leadership did not count success in lives spared. They calculated victory in the enemy's loss of men – and loss of face. The triumph at Stalingrad was a prestigious victory, and an undeniable turning point for the Red Army. For the first time in the war, Soviet troops were in no doubt that they could defeat the Germans and they were ready to surge on to Berlin.

As the Red Army continued its westward march to reclaim the rest of the motherland, residents began returning to their war-torn hometowns. The citizens of Stalingrad had paid perhaps the highest price of all. Nikolai Razuvayev, for example, saw his town bombed on Black Sunday, 23rd August 1942, then fought while his wife and children were still in the town. He was one of many who lost everything.

"I was only 400 metres away from my house, and with my commander's permission I went there to find out the fate of my family. When I got to the place where my house had stood, I saw only ruins. I found some neighbours living in a dugout and was told by



them that my whole family – my wife and two daughters – were dead. My younger daughter Galya had been killed along with her mother by an exploding shell, which had injured my elder daughter, Lyuba, who was eight years old. She had passed away only ten days before my arrival. A neighbour told me that my daughter kept saying that she was sure her dad would be coming to get her. She had waited and waited, but never lived to see that day."

How many civilians lost their lives to shelling, starvation and cold is unknown, but the figure must be in the tens of thousands. Their frozen bodies littered the city after its liberation, second only in number to the hundreds of thousands of dead soldiers.

"We gathered our own dead, but the Germans were left frozen on the ground," recalled one woman, with little disguised joy. *"They were everywhere. I was a driver and carried boxes of artillery shells in my lorry. I could hear their skulls crack beneath my wheel. Bones, too. And I was glad."*

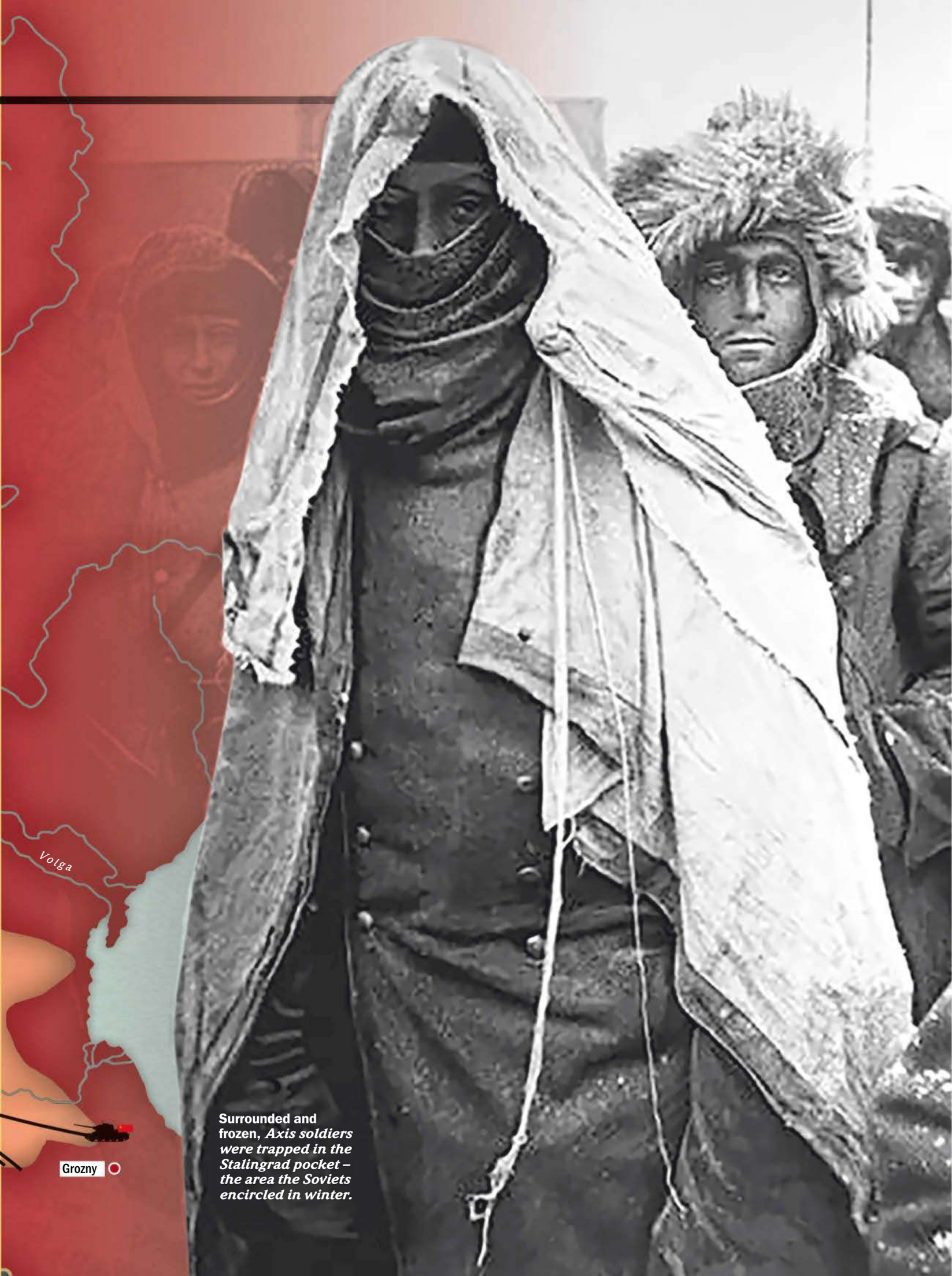
Only when the frost began to loosen its grip on Stalingrad, and the stench of death pervaded the air, were the bodies of the German soldiers taken away and buried. The city, however, would always be associated with the horrors of battle. Around the town, relics from the war continued to turn up. Mamayev Kurgan in the centre of the city was barren and black with gunpowder for a year after liberation. In the spring thaw of 1943, a passer-by saw a block of ice floating down the Volga. Inside, a German and a Russian lay entangled in the moment of death, a fleeting monument to the soldiers' shared fate – whatever their nationality. ■



The Sword of Stalingrad *was forged in Britain after the battle and given as a symbolic tribute to the city's defenders.*




EASTERN FRONT – winter 1942/1943
Helsinki
Leningrad
SOVIET UNION
Volga
Reichskommissariat Ostland
Moscow
Volga
Minsk
GERMANY
Kursk
Don
Reichskommissariat Ukraine
Stalingrad
Rostov
Odessa
Maikop
Sevastopol
Black Sea
Soviet victories up to 12th December 1942
Soviet victories up to 18th February 1943
0
175
350 km



Surrounded and frozen, ***Axis soldiers were trapped in the Stalingrad pocket – the area the Soviets encircled in winter.***

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Stalingrad's Soviet heroes *were honoured by the Allied forces in 1945 after the fronts from each side liberated Berlin.*

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Voices from Stalingrad: First-hand Accounts from World War II's Cruellest Battle by Jonathan Bastable (2007, David & Charles)
Stalingrad by Antony Beevor (1998, Viking Press)
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A Writer at War – A Soviet Journalist with the Red Army, 1941-1945 by Vasily Grossman (2007, Vintage)
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A Writer at War – A Soviet Journalist with the Red Army, 1941-1945 by Vasily Grossman (2007, Vintage)
Stalingrad by Jochen Hellbeck (2016, Public Affairs)



Soviet troops *sneak as near to the enemy as they can. Close up, German long-range and heavy artillery was useless.*

THE BATTLE OF STALINGRAD

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Regina Erak – regina.erak@globalworks.co.uk
Tel: +44 (0)7753 811622

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“CAN WE REALLY HAVE LOST SO MANY MEN? GOD DAMN THIS STALINGRAD.”

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